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The Romance of Berrymead Mill

by
H. ESCOTT INMAN

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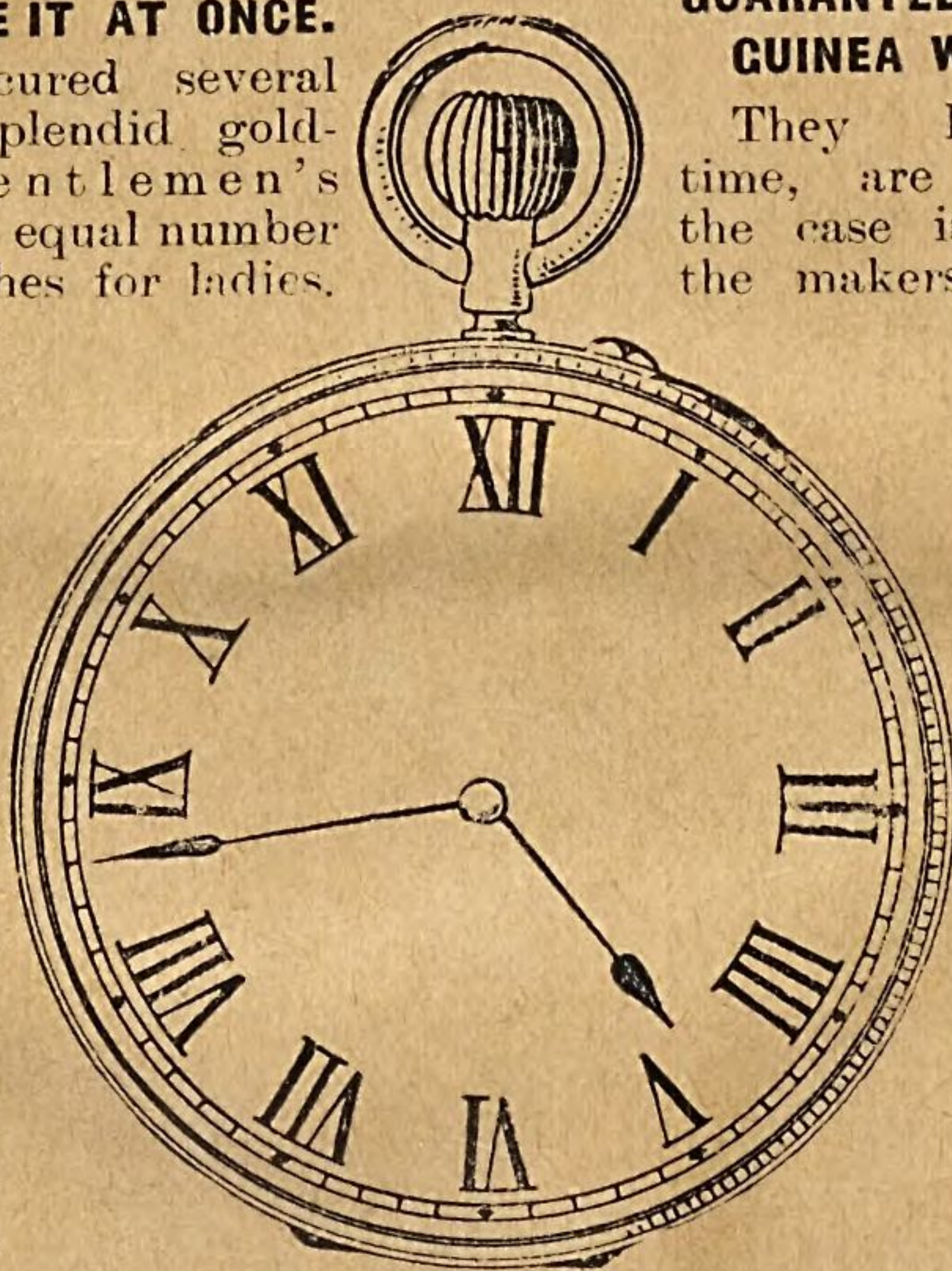
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The Romance of Berrimeed Mill,

A Powerful Story of Lancashire Life.

BY H. ESCOTT-INMAN.

CHAPTER 1.

The Lass From London.

A RAY of sunlight fell athwart the engine-house and played upon the polished steel of the pistons, and old Peter Hart frowned and, taking a handful of waste, wiped an imaginary speck from that bright surface, as though he would fain brush away the sunlight with it.

Outside, all was brightness. The sun sinking in the western sky was painting earth and heaven with its parting glory. Great banks of cloud turned crimson and pink as the rays kissed them; the murk, rising from a hundred smoke-belching stacks, caught the reflection and blushed at its own defilement. The heavens declared the glory of the Lord, and the earth gave back an echo of the anthem. The moors were bathed in the evening glow; the distant hills softened in the mellow light, and from the wooded cloughs a purple haze rose slowly upwards.

And Peter Hart frowned at that ray of light, for he knew that when it came slanting across his engines "knocking off" time was near; and, though the mills were going full swing, Factory Acts were strict, and factory inspectors stern.

He looked up at the clock—it afforded him no comfort. He pulled out his watch—more reliable, in his estimation, than any clock that ever ticked—it had no consolation for him. And at last, with a reluctant sigh, he pulled a string, a hoarse whistle rang out, and work at Berrimeed Mill was over for the day.

It was just as that signal sounded that a girl entered the yard of Berrimeed Mill, and glanced around in hesitation—a girl so obviously a stranger that she at once attracted the attention of two or three men there, a fact which she no sooner perceived than she advanced towards them with the question:

"Can you please tell me where I can find the manager?"

"Th' manager?" repeated one, after a somewhat prolonged stare. "Ay, he's in th' office; but he'll be busy. Wor might yo' want wi' him?"

"I want to get work at the mill. I come from London."

Another stare, even harder than the first, then the direction came:

"Go in yond door. Th' office is straight afore yo'."

She thanked the speaker, and turned to follow his directions; and the man turned to his companions.



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"Gum! Wor'll Mestur Dwite say to that? Hoo's fro' Lunnon, and hoo wants wark at th' mill! That's a licker! Ha, ha!"

Meanwhile the girl found herself in a room wherein a couple of hands were busy making bobbins and covering them with leather, and to one of them she repeated her question, asking whether the manager was there.

The man laid aside his work, and going to a door which led into an inner room, he thrust his head inside. The girl behind him could hear all that was said.

"There's a lass to see you, sir."

"A lass?" The voice sounded short and sharp—rather irritable, the girl thought. "One of the girls. I am busy now; I can't see her. She must come in the morning."

"Hoo's not wun of aar hands, sir—hoo's a stranger."

"A stranger! Who is she—what does she want? Oh, send her in!"

The listening girl made a little grimace, and a gleam of something like amusement shone for a moment in her eyes; but the next instant she dropped them demurely, as she entered the manager's presence, and found herself confronted by a stout, hard-featured man, with "business" stamped all over him, and cotton fluff sticking to his coat.

The manager eyed her up and down, and at last said gruffly:

"Well, young woman, what may you want—eh?"

"I heard that work was plentiful in the district, and I want a place in the mill, please, sir."

"You want a place in the mill?"

The girl bowed. Bowed! The manager stared at her in silence. This was no mill lass. She did not look like, speak like, or behave like one; nor was she dressed like the mill girls were. She wore a neat black jacket and dress, with hat to match; boots instead of clogs; and gloves. A girl wearing gloves coming for a job! For a minute Mr. Dwite thought that some sort of joke was being played upon him, and he rapped his knuckles sharply upon his desk as he demanded:

"Where do you come from, girl? You are not a native of these parts."

"No, sir. I come from London."

"From London! You have come from London to get work here? I never heard of such a thing! You have wasted your time and money, my girl, and you are wasting my time now. The best thing that you can do is to get back to London as quick as you can—take the next train there."

"But," she protested, "I am willing to learn, sir."

"Learn!" repeated the manager. "Do you know, girl, that the lasses who work here, and the men, too, for the matter of that, are brought up to it from childhood? Would you like to work amongst a crowd of children who keep running to and fro with cops and spindles, getting a lick from their gaffer if they do not move fast enough?"

"I would begin in that way, sir, if there is no other method of starting," came the calm answer. And William Dwite banged his fist down.

"I like your spirit, my girl, but you won't begin here, at any rate. If you are fool enough to take such a job, I am not fool enough to offer it. You are not the sort that mill girls are made from. Go and get work of some other sort—a shop girl, that is more in your line. There, I have no more time to waste." And he turned back to his papers, leaving the girl to depart with the best grace she could muster.

The men outside had heard what was passing; one of the loungers had also crept in to listen. The idea of a stranger coming all the way from London to get work there was so novel that it had spread from one to another as the operatives came swarming out, and quite a crowd were gathered in the yard as she came from the office.

"Yond's her! By gum! Hey Lorjus!"

The exclamations passed from one to another as she appeared. Had not her errand been known, her appearance would have attracted attention. The mill girls wore short skirts, light blouses, and long aprons; their arms were bare to the elbow; and over their heads they flung woollen shawls. She, of all the women in the yard, alone wore a hat.

"She mun be daft to come here!"

The words were spoken to a strapping wench by her nearest neighbour, and the girl cast a curious look of mingled pity and admiration towards the stranger as she answered:

"By gum, hoo's pratty! Poor thing! Happen hoo's got neaw friends. Happen hoo knaws wor it is to clem. Aw doan't see hoo's daft because hoo comes t' get wark."

She pushed her way forward as she spoke, with a curious mixture of diffidence and determination, and she said, laying one strong hand on the stranger's arm:

"Did Mestur Dwite gi' yo' a job, lass?"

The stranger paused, somewhat surprised; but seeing the kindly face and the honest eyes, she shook her head and answered:

"No. He would not give me a trial, because I knew nothing about the work. I would have tried hard to learn."

"Owd Dwite's a grumpy pig," came the reply. "There's wark enough an' to spare at th' mill. Bud happen yo' may get a job at some o' th' others—Berrimeed's isn't th' only mill in th' place. Naa, if yo'd happened to see Mestur Marshall, he wod ha' helped yo'. Wheer art livin', lass?"

"I have not got any place yet. I only came here this afternoon, and it was no use looking for rooms before I knew whether I could get employment."

The mill hand looked at her as if in some doubt; then she said slowly:

"Happen yo'd best come wi' me. Yo' canna go walkin' round fur rooms ta-neet. Yo' come awhoam wi' me an' see muther. Yo' needna mind about payin'," she added quickly. "Happen yo' may find summat to do in th' morning."

"That is very kind," the stranger replied. "I was thinking that I should have to go to the hotel."

"If yo'd plenty of brass yo' might, but I reckon they doan't want poor girls whoa are lewking fur wurk. Nay, yo' come whoam wi' me, and see muther. Aw wish yo' had seen Mestur Marshall, and—— Gum! Theer he is, an' he's beckoning to me!"

Marshall Berrimeed was the junior partner of Berrimeed's. Almost immediately after the manager had so unceremoniously dismissed the applicant for work, he had entered the office with a good-natured:

"Hallo, Dwite, what has flustered you?"

"Flustered me! Hang it, I never knew of such a thing! A girl—a pretty, well-dressed, well-spoken girl—coming all the way from London to ask for work here! I felt like a brute to refuse her, but of course I had to. She has only just gone. You must have passed her, I should think."

"A girl coming all the way from London?" repeated the junior partner. And the manager nodded.

"Yes. Look, there she is now! She is talking to one of our hands."

"I should like to speak with her," said Marshall Berrimeed, passing out. And William Dwite banged his hand down, and said aloud:

"I am willing to bet a pound to a shilling that he offers her something to do. I will take my oath of it. And if he does, there is going to be a row!"

Meanwhile, unconscious of the manager's thoughts, Marshall Berrimeed went out and beckoned to the mill lass, and a dozen voices cried:

"Kitty, Muster Marshall is callin' yo'!"

"Come wi' me," Kitty whispered to her companion.

And the two went forward.

Marshall Berrimeed glanced quickly at the stranger. He saw a beautiful oval face, with delicate features, and a brow smooth and intellectual. He saw a grace and beauty far beyond that of any mill lass, and something which seemed to speak of culture, which could not be disguised by humility of manner nor humble dress.

"Who is this stranger with you?" he asked.

And Kitty broke into explanations.

"Hoo's a poor lass fro' Lunnon, Mestur Marshall; hoo has come all th' way to lewk fur wark, bud Mestur Dwite wodna gi' her a job."

"You have come all the way from London to seek work?" The junior partner turned to the London girl as he spoke. "And you know nothing of the work in a mill! What put it into your head to come here for employment?"

"Because I heard that work was plentiful and well paid," she replied. "If you know anything of London, you will know how difficult it is for a friendless girl to obtain any employment which will keep her in the necessities of life, and enable her to pay her way."

"I do, indeed, know that," he answered gravely. "But surely it was a rash venture to come here. Where are you going to now?"

"Aw'm takin' her back to muther, Mestur Marshall," Kitty explained. "Hoo's got nawhere to go. Hoo can stay th' neet, an' happen hoo wull manage to get summat to do in th' mornin'."

He nodded. His eyes were fixed upon that fair face and delicate figure. It was hard for one so manifestly unaccustomed to life's battle to be alone and friendless. He did not like interfering with the manager's decisions, but he knew that work could be found for the girl, and that no one would be the worse off for it.

"It is good of you to take care of strangers," he said to Kitty. "I will see what can be done. Perhaps I will call and see——"

And he looked towards the stranger inquiringly.

"My name is Mary Grey," she said, rightly interpreting the look; and he smiled.

The junior partner of Berrimeed's had a winning smile.

"Thank you! I will come and see you, and perhaps something can be done."

And he turned away, thinking:

"Poor girl! She has certainly not had to face life's battles very long. The marks of the fight are not stamped upon her brow yet, as they will be ere long. I must talk Dwite over, and find something for her to do."

And Kitty, walking along by her companion's side, said delightedly:

"That's rare and lucky! 'Twas Mestur Marshall himsel', an' he's as kind as owd Dwite is crusty!"

And Mary Grey smiled in answer as she thought to herself, "What a noble face that man has got!"

The man thinking of the girl, and the girl thinking of the man—the junior partner of Berrimeed's—and the unknown girl from London seeking employment at a few shillings a week. Two threads from the mill of life being drawn together towards the loom of the great weaver of all.

And the shadows fell, and the clip of the clogs grew fainter; the mills were dark and deserted, and the weary toilers wended their ways on to the peaceful haven of "home."

CHAPTER 2.

A Strange Business.

"**H**ERE we are! This is th' haase. Come in, an' dunna be feart, as yo'll ha' naught bud a welcome."

They had turned into one of the side-streets of the town—a mean street, with poor-looking houses, some of them sadly neglected in appearance. Kitty stopped at one door and entered, and her companion, following her, found herself in a room neat, clean, and comfortable.

The table was laid, evidently in preparation for supper. The master of the house sat by the fire, indulging in a quiet smoke and a glance at the evening paper. His wife, a comely woman of about forty, busied herself in the getting ready of the meal. Two lads, one of seventeen and one a couple of years younger, sat talking with a slip of a girl of fourteen, the three evidently just in from work, for the significant cotton fluff was still clinging to them. Another girl of ten was helping her mother, and a little year-old laddie sat perched in a high chair.

The whole family looked up as Kitty entered, and the youngest of the boys cried, with the bluntness of youth:

"Hello, Kitty, whoa's yond lass wi' yo'?"

"Ned, howd thy tongue, an' dunna be cheeky!" said the father reprovingly. "Naa, Kitty, wor's amiss?"

"Nowt, feyther. Aw's browt a lodger—fur th' neet, at ony rate. Hoo's come aw th' way fro' Lunnon lewking fer wark, and Mestur Marshall told her—her name's Mary—that he wod see wor he could dew. He asked her wor hoo were goin', an' hoo had neaw were ready, so Aw said hoo could come whoam wi' me—fur th' sake o' Bertha, you knaw, muther," she added gently.

And the mother nodded.

"Yo' did reet, lass—yo' did reet!" she answered. "Aw's glad to do aught to repay that debt. Come in, lass! Aar's is na' loike a foin Lunnon haase, Aw suppose, but we 'ull dew wor we can to mak' yo' comfor'ble."

"It is very kind—more kind than I expected to find anyone be to a stranger," replied Mary Grey. "I do not know how to thank you, Mrs.——"

"Hey, that's loike aar Kitty!" laughed the father. "Never tow'd aar name. Aw'm John Medster, an' th' owd woman's my missis, an' th' best muther in th' world. Yond is Dick. He comes after Kitty. An' this is Ned. Yond lass is Annie—caw'd efter her muther—an' this is aar Bess—hoo's muther's helper; an' yond be th' boss o' th' haase, aar nipper Charlie. Theer, naa tha knaws us aw, so go wi' Kitty an' tak' thy hat off, an' then come an' mak' thysel' awwhoam."

The girl complied with this hospitable direction, and when she again entered the room the meal was on the table, and the family gathered round.

"Draw oop, lass," said John Medster—"draw oop! 'Tisna as foin as Lunnon ways, bud 'tis aw we can offer."

"It is not London ways to be as kind as this to strangers," the girl answered.

But Mrs. Medster cried:

"Nay, yo're wrong. 'Tis th' ways o' some in Lunnon, God bless 'em, if they still live theer! Some i' Lunnon are angels."

And she rose, a catch in her breath, and went into the little scullery, while the visitor looked somewhat surprised.

"Tak' neaw heed, lass," said the master of the house, though a tear was

in his own eye. "It's a sawft spot tha's touched. Hoo thinks o' aar eldest—aar Bertha—who is deead an' gone. Hoo wor pratty an' good, an' a scamp came to these parts an' got her away wi' him. He said he was a lord, or summat loike that. Aw yeered after that he was a low, swindling rascal. Bud he got my poor girl away, an' deserted her in Lunnon—it's five years back naa—an' he left her to die. Ay, an' die hoo wod ha' done, bud sumun found her, an' took pity on her, an' nursed her an' led her back to th' Lord hoo'd forgotten. Ay, an' then, when 'twas aw no good, an' death came nigh, they sent fur th' wife an' me to go t' th' lass, so that hoo died wi' her muther's arms round her. An' 'tis that mak's th' wife loike to aid any whoa are friendless. Dunna yo' mind her siking. Huish wi' yo'. Heer hoo comes."

The woman entered as if nothing had occurred. And then the children plied the visitor with questions concerning the mighty place from which she had come; and they seemed astonished to learn that it was much as everywhere else—that it had its poverty and sorrow, its squalid streets as well as its noble ones.

"Aw allis thought 't wur rich an' gradely," said Ned.

And Mary Grey shook her head.

"Oh, no! There is trouble and sorrow there, Ned. You had better far stay here, where you have a good home and kind parents."

"Hey, yo're reet there, lass!" cried John Medster. "Ned had gotten it into his yed to go away. Aw've told him that he'll allis be sorry fur it if he does."

"And I believe that he will. You have a good mother here, Ned."

"Ay, he has, lass"—from the father—"th' best i' t' world! Th' missis works hard here. Yo' see, muther dunna go t' th' mill. Noa; we all warks hard, bud muther stops awwhoam, wi' Bess to help her."

"I hardly see how she could go to work," Mary Grey said.

"Neaw? Why, theer's few bud goes. Aw dunna howd wi' it mysel'. It's aw wark, an' leavin' th' childer to get along as best they can, or else payin' sumbry to gi' 'em a lewk. There's noather toime to rest nor breathe wi' sum o' 'em. Aw knaws sum i' this varry-street whoa, 'cept when th' wakes is on, ha' never been as far as th' hills yonder. They wark fro' morn to neet, fro' childhood to owd age, an' th' only toime they spend brass is when they goes to Blackpoo', or some place o' that sort; an' then they fling away moar than they can afford—thirty or fowerty paands in th' wik—an' come whoam to slave away to get it aggean. We dunna believe in it. Muther, hoo stays awwhoam, and we warks, and whoam is whoam for us."

"Feyther," put in Kitty, "Aw clean forgot. Mestur Marshall is comin' here to see Mary presently."

"Well, Aw'm sure that if he dunna mind, Aw dunna. He can talk to her in th' best-room. An' Aw hope that he'll gi' her summat to do."

"Bud Mary'll want sum proper clothes," put in the motherly Mrs. Medster. "Hoo wod spoil those. You'll ha' to lend her sum, Kitty."

"Oh, no!" interposed Mary. "I have some things that will do in my box. I left it at the station; I will go and get it."

"Aw'll come wi' yo', Mary," said Kitty. And at that her father looked up, somewhat surprised.

"Aw thought that Tom was comin' to see yo' ta-neet, lass," he said.

But Kitty shook her head.

"Tom's not comin'," she replied. And her father looked grave.

"Lewk here, Kitty, wor's amiss between thee an' Tom? He dunna come half so much as he did. He's been here bud two-three toimes this last two wiks. Hast quarrelled wi' him?"

"Neaw, we's not quarrelled. He's busy," the girl answered, with affected carelessness.

But then her brother Dick chimed in:

"Aw dunna think much about him bein' busy, Kitty. It's my opinion that Tom's daddlin' around after Marg'ret Hall a deal too much; an' hoo's noa good to any mon."

"Huish wi' yo', Dick!" said the father sharply. "How long ha' yo' set up as a tan-tattlin' blether skite? There's more lumber than enough made in th' world by such chitter-chatter. Yo're ower young to critycise folk."

"Aw'm only saying wor Aw've seen," replied the lad stoutly. "Aw knaw that Tom's been round at Marg'ret's place more'n once. Wor's he want wi' th' loikes o' her, an' he walkin' aat wi' aar Kitty?"

"Hey, wot a lung tail aar cat's gettin'! There, get aat wi' Ned, tha sawft gawpy, an' dunna let thi tongue run away wi' thi wits!"

"Well, you'll see. Tellin's knawin', an' Aw's tow'd yo'." And with that the lad went out; while John Medster turned towards Kitty.

"Never heed his blather, lass," he said kindly. "Nobut Aw can see that summat's wrong; an' Aw'll noan ha' Tom nor any other mon play fast an' loose wi' tha. Aw'll see Tom, Aw will, an' Aw'll bottom this lumber quick. There, yo' go wi' Mary. Aw'm sorry this ha' come oop."

"Aw'm not!" replied Kitty stoutly. "Aw'll trust my Tom; Aw knaws he's true to me. Come on, Mary!" And the two girls went out together.

"Kitty," the London girl said, as they walked on, anxious to turn her companion's thoughts from the unpleasant channel into which they had fallen, "what was the name of the man who took your sister away?"

"It was Bryant—Lord Bryant he called himself. He wor a bad 'un. Aw'm capt at feyther tellin' yo' so much. Happen it is because yo's fro' Lunnon. Hey, Aw'm poor company for yo', Mary. The rubbish that Dick said maks me feel aw eawt o' flunters. Lewk heer! Aw'll get owd Ned—he's porter at th' station—to tak' your box up to the haase, an' we'st walk round a bit, shall we?"

Mary assented readily; and the matter of the box being satisfactorily arranged, the two walked on, Kitty taking opportunity to unbosom herself about "her Tom," and how they had "walked aat" for a whole year. Only lately Tom had been different, and Kitty had heard that he had been seen up at Margaret Hall's cottage by "Owd Gabbly Fowt." Margaret's place was a "lonesome little haase, reet by itsel' after yo' had gone down th' ginnel."

"Marg'ret, hoo be middlin' lewkin', Aw'll allow," she said, "an' hoo's as sly as a raten in a grid hoile; bud Aw'll trust my Tom. It 'ud breck my hert, Aw think, if Aw knew he wor desaving me."

"Who is Margaret Hall, Kitty?" queried Mary, feeling that she was expected to say something to comfort her companion, yet not knowing how to do it.

"Hoo be a queer wench. Hoo lives there, wi' noabry bud little Kit; an' noabry knaws whoa Kit is, nor wor Marg'ret does for her livin'. Hoo doan't wark at noa callin', that's sartin."

"A mysterious personage," reflected Mary Grey. Then she added: "Where is her cottage, Kitty?"

"We'st go that way, if tha wishes," was the answer.

And the two turned towards the outskirts of the town, past one mill after another—all the mills seemed to be built in the outskirts—and then they stood on the sloping side of a hill, and the wild land lay before them, dim, deserted, mysterious in the silence of the night.

They walked on; the smell of grass and wild-flower came like a breath of health after the closeness of the streets. They came at length to a quaint

little hamlet, all silent and shut, and Kitty informed Mary that this was "Owd Gabbly Fowt." They passed this, wended their way down a narrow passage-way, and there before them they saw a cottage standing alone, and—

A shriek—a strange, wild shriek, ringing out horribly upon the silence of the night. The two girls halted abruptly, and Kitty, grasping her companion's arm, murmured hoarsely:

"Wot wor that, Mary? Lewk! Yond's a mon runnin' as if th' boggart wor after him! Aw'm skeered, Mary. Let us goo bak!"

But the London girl was made of different metal, and she announced her intention of going to see what was wrong.

"Aw won'," Kitty declared. "Aw'll not go nigh th' place. Aw'm feart."

"Then I must go alone," was the reply. "Hark! There is a child crying! I must go!"

"Noa, don't! Aw'm terrified! Aw feel as if summat horrible wor there! Dunna go, Mary! Mary, Aw say——"

But Mary Grey was already at the window, peering into the cottage, for the blind was not drawn, and a light burned within; and Kitty, from sheer dread of being left alone, followed her.

But what did the light reveal that the girl should give a cry of horror, and then resolutely enter the house?

Kitty followed her, only to cling to her and scream as she saw what that room contained. From one corner a little mite of a child started up, rushing to Mary as she entered, clutching her skirts, and burying his face in their folds as if to shut out the sight at which his baby eyes had looked.

A terrible sight indeed! There by the table a woman sat in a tall, wooden armchair. One arm rested limply in her lap, the other hung straight down over the other side of the chair. The head had fallen back, the face was turned directly towards the light, and the face was the face of a dead woman!

CHAPTER 3.

A Voiceless Accusation.

THE woman was dead—one glance was enough to assure Mary Grey of that. With the child clinging to her skirts, sobbing in its terror, with Kitty clutching at her arm, she stood on the threshold, gazing with horrified eyes at the grim scene before her, until her companion wailed out:

"Oh, Mary, hoo's deead—hoo's deead! Let's go away! Aw'm feart!"

That roused Mary Grey, and she turned to Kitty.

"We cannot go away. Run—run as fast as you can, and tell someone! They must get the doctor and the police!"

"Bud wor 'ull yo' dew?"

"I shall stay here."

"Stay heer," cried Kitty, in dismay—"heer wi' her! Art tha na feart?"

"No, no! Run—you are losing time! Run!"

She literally thrust her companion out, and then picked up the child, striving to soothe its fears; while the little blue-eyed, golden-haired lad sobbed out:

"Naughty man beat Aunty Margy!"

A fair woman that Aunty Margy had been, Mary Grey thought; but on the lips was an expression of mingled fear and defiance, and there was a

cruel bruise on the temple, and dark marks on the white throat. A woman fair and young—what wicked hand had been raised against this beautiful temple of life, so to shatter and mar it that the aggrieved spirit could no longer dwell within its portals?

There was nothing she could do but comfort the child and wait; and she heaved a sigh of relief when at length hurrying footsteps were heard, and a group of eager men and women gathered in the doorway, peeping in as though afraid to cross the threshold.

"Poor lass! Hoo wor a strange body, and hoo rarely mixed wi' her neighbours, but hoo gave naa offence to awmbry," said one.

"Ay; bud Tom Rhole's been comin' to see her lately."

"He wor this way ta-neet. Aw seed un in th' place mysel'."

"Ay, we aw know Marg'ret; hoo warn a one to be meytherin' wi' men, bud hoo seemed fair set on Tom Rhole!"

"By gum! Lewk ahere! This be Tom's cap!"

The speaker entered, and pounced upon some object which lay upon the floor. He held it up for the eager eyes to behold. A plain cloth cap, with the name "T. Rhole" stamped inside the lining.

A hush fell upon all. With the dead woman before them, and the cap in their companion's hand, what could they think but that the man who had worn it had committed the crime?

More footsteps. The inspector entered, attended by a constable, and immediately upon their heels Kitty came, breathless, bringing the doctor.

"Dead!" was the verdict. They had known that before he came. "Nothing can be done."

"You two girls were the first to discover the crime, were you not?" the inspector asked.

And Mary Grey answered:

"Yes, sir. We heard a scream, and then the sound of a child crying, and we looked in at the window—the blind was up as it is now—and we saw——"

"Yes, yes. No one else was in the room?"

"Only this little child, sir."

"But if you heard the scream, you must have got here almost as soon as the crime was committed. Did you see no one—no one escaping?"

"There was a man running away, sir, but he was too far off for us to be able to distinguish his features."

"Tom Rhole has been heer, inspector," put in the man who held the cap.

"He wor seen in th' village this evenin'; an' this is his cap."

"Ah!" The inspector took it; while Kitty turned ghastly white. "Ah! And where did you find this, my man?"

"Here, sir. Aw picked it oop just naa."

"I see. I will have your name; and both yours." And he turned to the two girls. "Doctor, the body had better be taken to the station. We will lock this place up. What is to be done with this child, though?" And he nodded towards little Kit.

The villagers looked at each other, but none volunteered to take the little one in, and the doctor said that it had better be taken to the workhouse.

But then Kitty spoke—poor, anxious, heartsick Kitty.

"Dunna dew that, sir. He's bud a poor little chap t' go t' th' bastile. Aw'll tak' him whoam wi' me fur ta-neet. Aw knows little Kit, an' he 'ull be aar reet wi' me."

"Very well. Now, remember, we shall want both of you girls at the inquest to-morrow. You can go now."

"Come, Kitty!"

Mary Grey touched her friend's arm, pity in her heart; and together,

taking little Kit with them, they went out into the darkness, while a greater darkness rested upon poor Kitty's heart.

"Tom wodna dew it!" she said again and again. "Aw'm sure that Tom's true to me; an' even if he worna, he wodna dew a thing like that. Wor wod he want to harm Marg'ret fur? Aw knaw my Tom didna dew it!"

It was a sad home-going. And when at last they reached their destination, and Kitty flung herself, weeping, into her mother's arms, John Medster laid aside his pipe and looked at them in mingled bewilderment and dismay.

"Marg'ret murdered!" he gasped. "Marg'ret murdered—an' Tom's cap found in th' room! Aw'm capt—Aw'm fair capt!"

"Tom never did it, feyther! Aw'm sure that Tom never did it!" sobbed Kitty. And her father went to her and kissed her tear-wet cheek.

"There, there, lass! Yo' go wi' muther fur the while. It's a big lumber fur yo', but it 'ull be bottomed in toime. An' yo' browt th' little 'un wi' yo!" he went on to Mary. "Poor little chap! Noabry knaws whoa he is. Mary, lass, he 'ull ha' to sleep wi' yo', Aw'm feart, fur we ha' aw we can dew tew stow away aar aan; and Aw's thinkin' that you'd best gi' him a slice an' soop, and then get him to bed. Theer may be moar lumber heer ta-neet," he added, with a sigh.

So Mary Grey carried her little charge to her own tiny room and undressed him; and as she unloosened the little blouse something fell from it to the ground—something which Mary picked up and took over to the light, turning it over thoughtfully.

Then she tucked the little mite safely into bed and once more examined that object. A stud, a bead, a button! A little dark object lying in that white palm—an object from which a tiny gleam as of fire came when the light fell upon it.

Mary Grey pursed her lips and frowned thoughtfully; then, carefully placing that little object in her purse, she descended, just as Annie came racing in with the news that Margaret was murdered, and that the police were searching for Tom Rhole everywhere.

"Huish wi' yo'!" cried her father angrily. "Isn't it trouble enough, bud yo' mun come bletherin' in loike that! Come, Kitty, lass, doan't sit siking theer. 'Tis naa good siking ower sheeded milk—not that Aw'm sayin' 'tis sheeded yet. Noabry knaws that Tom's guilty, though folk seem pratty quick to jump at th' idea."

"Aw canna help siking, feyther, my heart's ower full. Aw'll never think my Tom's a bad bobbin. He's a gradely foine lad, an' he's th' copp'st hand at his wark o' any i' th' mill. Hasna he been courtin' me a whole year—partly wot? Aw'll na care a toffee dog wot folk say. Aw'll na care if they found a hunderd caps wi' his name in. Aw'll na think evil o' him, not ef th' Owd Lad hissel' accused him. Aw'll stand oop fur Tom—Aw wull, Aw wull!"

And, overcome with her grief, Kitty burst into tears again.

"Poor lass—poor lass!" sighed her father. "It's a ter'ble lumber, an' that's th' truth. Whoa's that at th' door?"

"It's Tom. Aw know his knock."

Kitty started forward eagerly, as her brother Dick opened the door and let a young man in.

"Tom!"

"Kitty!"

They were in each other's arms; and Mary Grey looked keenly at this man—Kitty's sweetheart—the man whom they said had deliberately murdered Margaret Hall.

If first impressions could count for anything, the first impression with her

was decidedly favourable. She saw a tall, well-formed young man, with frank face and open, honest eyes; rather a weak face, she thought—a man easily led, but on the whole honest and true.

"Oh, Tom, Tom, dew yo' knaw wor they're sayin' about yo'?"

"Ay, lass, Aw knaws full well. Aw felt that Aw must come an' see yo' an' tell yo' that Aw'm innocent. Aw knaws things is against me, bud Aw'll tak' my oath Aw never raised my hand against Marg'ret Hall!"

"Bud that didst go to see her ta-neet, Tom," John Medster said, shaking his head. "Aw'm not a-going to turn against yo', unless Aw'm sewer that thou desarves nowt better than to be turned ageean; bud Aw'm thinkin', Tom, that tha hasna been above-board wi' Kitty here. There's been sum queer goin's on 'twixt thysel' an' Marg'ret Hall."

"There's been nowt wrong, Mestur Medster—indeed there's been nowt wrong!" cried Tom Rhole. "Aw've been a fool—a sawft, gawky fool—an' Aw'm th' first to own t'it, bud Aw've never been false to Kitty. It's too long to tell th' whole story naa, though. It's true that Aw was at Marg'ret Hall's place ta-neet. Aw wanted to see her 'bout summat, bud Aw never raised hand ageean her. Aw—— Oh, my God"—and he covered his face with his hands as he spoke, and shuddered—"Aw can see her naa! Aw can see her staring een, an' see her yed drooped, an' yer the shriek that hoo gave! Just think o' it! Aw went to talk wi' her friendly, an' that is wor Aw saw. Wasn't it enuff to scare a mon? Aw lost my wits—Aw was clean daft, Aw think—an' instead o' goin' fur help as Aw ought to ha' done, Aw just run away as ef th' broggart'd been after me. Then when Aw'd quietened a bit, Aw knawed that Aw had been a fool, fur th' folks wod be sewer to foind my cap, and think that Aw'd done it."

"Aw walked about fur a while, not knawin' wor to do, an' then Aw thought Aw'd come an' see yo', Kitty, an' tell yo', an' then go an' gi' mysel' oop."

"Oh, Tom! Oh, doan't talk so! Tha' musna dew that!" And Kitty, in terror, clung around her lover's neck, beseeching him to flee.

But John Medster laid his hand upon her arm.

"Huish wi' yo', lass!" he said sadly. "Wor Tom says is reet. It may seem a hard roaad to travel, but it's the reet one, an' he mun dew it; an' yo'——"

Another knock—a loud, imperious knock—and the door was opened, and Kitty gave a bitter, bitter cry, as she caught sight of the uniforms of the constables there.

"Oh, Tom—oh, my Tom!"

They came in, two men stern of face, and one laid his hand at once upon poor Tom's shoulder.

"Thomas Rhole, I arrest you upon the charge of having caused the death of Margaret Hall, of Gabbly Old End. I warn you that anything you say may be used against you in evidence."

"Aw knaws, sir—Aw knaws," said Tom sadly. "It's bitter enough, bud it's worse to ha' it before my poor lass here. Aw was comin' to gi' mysel' oop. Aw just come to bid th' lass good-bye, an' Aw wor comin' to yo'."

"I see. Mary Grey!" Mary stepped forward, the tears in her own eyes. "You were one of the girls who found the body. You are to be at the Town Hall at the inquest to-morrow morning at ten o'clock. Kitty Medster, you must also attend. Now, my man"—this to Tom—"say good-bye to your sweetheart. Duty must be done, and you must come with me."

Tom clasped her in his arms and kissed her pale face again and again.

"Good-bye—good-bye, Kitty, my poor lass! Yo' wull believe in me? Yo' won't think that Aw'm guilty?"

"Aw won't, Tom—Aw won't! Not ef aw th' world thinks yo' guilty, Aw wonna!"

"Now, lad! Now, my girl! He must come with us now. Kiss him and let him go."

"Aw—Aw canna! Aw—Tom—Aw canna, Tom! Oh, Tom, come back to me!"

Her father held her, or she would have followed. They went out, those stern-faced men. They went, and they took her Tom, a prisoner, with them!

CHAPTER 4.

The Inquest.

INTEREST was at fever heat, the coroner's court was crowded, and many were unable to obtain admittance.

Beside the coroner himself several influential members of the district were seated, amongst them Samuel Berrimeed and his son Marshall, for the accused man was one of their hands, and they were interested in his fate.

"That is the London girl," the whisper went round, as Mary entered with Kitty. "But what has she brought the child for?"

"It is the dead woman's nephew—at least, that is what she said it was!"

"But the little fellow is too young to give evidence, and——"

"Silence!"

The court-house grew still, and, the jury being sworn, the proceedings commenced, the coroner explaining how the dead woman had been found.

"She is known as Margaret Hall," he said, "and for four years she has lived alone in a little cottage near Old Gabbly. She was not known to receive any visitors, and she held herself aloof from her neighbours. She seems to have had some private means, since she did not work for a living, and yet maintained herself and the child who lived with her in apparent comfort. Gentlemen, that this woman has met her death by violence there seems no room for doubt, and the man who stands charged by the police, Thomas Rhole, is known to have been visiting her cottage lately, presumably as a suitor for her hand. These are the facts of the case. You will now hear the evidence of the various witnesses."

The inspector was first, and he told how he had been summoned to the cottage, how he found the body, and how he had been given a cap with the accused man's name inside; that, in his opinion, being ground enough for his ordering the detention of Thomas Rhole.

"Is the accused represented?" asked the coroner, and Marshall Berrimeed rose.

"I have just asked that question, Mr. Coroner. If the verdict of the jury is against Thomas Rhole, I will see that he is properly represented before the magistrates."

The coroner nodded, and the doctor was called to give a description of the injuries and the cause of death. The woman had been killed by a violent blow on the back of the head, and she had also been half strangled.

"Katherine Medster!" And poor Kitty, looking very white and miserable, took her place, and was asked whether she knew the accused.

"Knew un!" she said. "Ay, he's my 'Tom, an' Aw know he didna do it!"

"You and the accused have been keeping company?"

"Ay. We'se been walkin' aat a year—partly wot."

"But lately he has not been so regular in his visits to your house?"

The girl hesitated—she saw the drift of the question.

"You must answer the question, please," the coroner said.

"Aw won't! Aw won't say nowt to harm him! Aw know he didna do it!"

"You saw a man running away from the cottage. Did you recognise him?"

"Aw didna! Aw didna see him! Aw won't say nowt more, not if Aw'm 'prisoned fur it!"

And Kitty burst into tears, while Tom said:

"Speak oop, lass, speak oop! Aw'm not feart fur yo' to answer, lass."

"Hold your tongue, sir," said the coroner sharply. "Until you are properly defended, it will be far wiser for you to make no statements."

"Mary Grey!"

"The lass fro' London," the whisper went round, as Mary stepped into the place vacated by Kitty. "Gum! Hoo's a pratty wench, sartinly."

Mary's answers were quiet and plain. She told of what had occurred so far as she had witnessed, and then the coroner asked her:

"You made a communication to the police, I understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have reason to believe that some man other than the prisoner was in that cottage last night?"

"Yes, sir."

A subdued hum went round, and Kitty turned and stared at her friend, while the coroner addressed the jury.

"I must explain, gentlemen, that this witness has shown a remarkable discretion. Something came to her notice which, if made public, might have defeated the ends of justice. It was a clue which seems to indicate that some other man besides the accused was with the deceased woman yesterday evening; but the police wish that clue to be kept a secret for a time. There is one other testimony to be given, by a witness so young that his words can have no legal value; and yet they may shed a great deal of light on the subject. The little child who saw the crime committed is here, and the witness Mary Grey has, by patient questioning, got a description of what took place from him. You had better hear this statement, and then decide whether it is anything which tells in the prisoner's favour. Now, Miss Grey."

And Mary lifted little Kit on to her lap, and asked him:

"Who beat Auntie Margy last night, Kit?"

"Naughty man," came the unhesitating answer. "Kit's 'fwaid of naughty man!"

"What did the naughty man call you, Kit?"

"Bwat," lisped the little lips, prefacing the word by a foul oath, which it could only have heard from the mouth of sin.

"Is that the naughty man?" asked Mary, lifting the child, and going towards Tom; and Kit's eyes beamed with laughter, and he stretched out his little hands.

"Dat's Tom. I like Tom. Tom didn't beat Auntie Margy!"

"Kit, did Tom come after the naughty man beat auntie?"

"Yes." The little head was nodded emphatically. "Yes, naughty man beat auntie and runned away, and I was 'fwaid, and hid in the corner 'cos auntie made funny noise. Den Tom comed in, and auntie cried out, and Tom cried out, and he runned away, too, and I cried, 'cos I was 'fwaid; and den oo came!"

"Gentlemen," said the coroner, "that evidence has no value, as it is not on oath; but from a common-sense point of view, the little child is not one to lie in such a matter. Moreover, he is not afraid of the accused, that is certain; while the remembrance of the man who struck his aunt terrifies him."

"Can the accused give any reason for his presence at the cottage last night?" asked the foreman of the jury.

"As he is not represented or legally advised, I should advise him not to do so," replied the coroner; but Tom turned and said:

"Aw want to explain, sir. Aw'm not feart to tell aw Aw knaws."

"If you wish to, I warn you that your words may be used against you. If you wish to make a statement, go into the witness-box and be sworn."

Unhesitatingly Tom complied, and then he turned to the jury.

"Gentlemen," he said, "Aw'm willin' to own that Aw'm a gormed fool, an' theer's na denyin' that. Aw knawed Marg'ret Hall sum toime—friendly like, nowt else—and—Aw'm shamed to say it, wi' my lass theer to yer it, but it's th' truth—sumtoimes Aw'd laugh an' chat wi' Marg'ret, vary friendly. Theer was na harm, moind. Aw wodna ha' thought o' nowt wrong, only presently Marg'ret got as if hoo loiked me too much, an' Aw had to tell her plain that Aw wodna come na more, for Aw was pledged to Kitty, an' Aw loved only her.

"Then Marg'ret, hoo seemed dredful put out, an' hoo brast aat at me **tin** Aw got fair razzored wi' her, an' Aw sed that Aw wid na go ageean. That was th' neet afore last, an' Aw meant to keep my word, only hoo wrote to me, an' hoo said that hoo had a sacrit to tell me that Aw wod be glad to yer, fur th' sake o' sum whoa Aw loved. Aw reckoned that hoo meant my Kitty here when hoo wrote that, so Aw went, just fo' th' last toime. But Aw couldna make awmbry yer when Aw got to th' haase, so Aw peeped in through th' window, an' Aw see her in her chair, lewking loike death. Then Aw went in, an' Aw called to her, an' hoo rolled her een, an' hoo greetet aat, an' hoo died afoor my een. Aw wor fair capt, an' Aw turned an' ran, witheawt lewkin' behint me. Aw ran aat into th' fields, an' aw th' toime Aw could see her een starin' an' gawpin' at me. An' then Aw found that Aw'd left my cap, an' Aw was feart to go back fo' it, though Aw knew that if awmbry found it they wod say that Aw'd been theer an' had killed Marg'ret. Aw was browt oop aw o' a heap at that, an' Aw thought that Aw'd best go an' tell my lass yond wot had happened, an' then go on to the police an' tell 'em theer. Aw went to Kitty's haase, an' while Aw was theer th' police came an' took me, an' that's aw Aw ha' to say, an' it's th' truth."

Then the coroner summed up, and dwelt upon the child's story, and the fact that it was quite possible for a man to lose his wits, and act as the accused had said he did. And the jury retired, and people chatted in undertones, and the general feeling seemed to be that Tom Rhole was innocent.

A brief interval, and back they came; and, oh, how eagerly Kitty looked towards them!

She knew those twelve men had the power to set Tom free, or to send him to be tried for murder.

"Are you all agreed, gentlemen?" the question was put, and the foreman answered in the affirmative.

"And what verdict do you find?"

"Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown!"

Tom was free. The stress and tension was over, and Kitty started up and flung her arms round the young man's neck, bursting into tears.

"My Tom! My Tom! Aw knawed fro' th' fust that tha was na guilty! Aw was sur o' it!"

Marshall Berrimeed came towards the group.

"Rhole," he said, "I congratulate you; but, having such a good little sweetheart, don't go flirting with other girls."

"Aw won't, sir. Aw'se learnt my lesson, an' Aw won't mak' a fool o' mysel' ageean."

Then Marshall Berrimeed turned to Mary.

"I compliment you upon the clever way in which you have given your evidence," he said. "You are staying with the Medsters, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then," he continued, "I will come and see you to-night. I understand now how it is you were out when I called last evening. I shall be sure to come."

"Thank you, sir," the girl replied; and he turned away.

"Strange!" he said to himself. "This is no ordinary girl. I am more and more interested."

Who shall picture the joy at that humble cottage when they returned home with Tom? Tom, who was so humble and contrite, and who assured Kitty again and again that there had been no real harm at his visiting the cottage at Gabbly Fowt.

"Aw never thought o' her as Aw thought o' yo', Kitty," he said. "Aw love yo'! Happen yo' won't think so now, but it's true. Aw love yo'!"

And Kitty smiled, and looked as if she did believe it, no matter what others might do.

And Mary, she was the heroine of the hour. It was her cleverness that had got the story out of little Kit, and, work or no work, she might stay there as long as she liked, and have the best they could give her.

As for little Kit, he should stay, too, until someone came to claim him. He should never go to the workhouse—poor little pretty Kit.

And, true to his promise, Marshall Berrimeed called that evening, and was shown into the Medsters' little "best room," and there Mary came, and he noted how graceful and full of refinement her gestures and voice were. She might have to work for her living now, but assuredly she had not always been called to such a battle.

He plunged into business at once.

"I understand that you seek work at one of the cotton-mills?" he said, and her answer was a quiet "Yes, sir."

He looked at her keenly. That "sir" was somehow strange to her lips. It did not come naturally.

"You have never done anything of the kind before?"

"No, sir."

"But is it not a somewhat bold venture upon your part?"

"Perhaps, sir; but it seems to me that it would not be a very difficult task to mind a machine—not anything calling for a great deal of technical skill. A drawing, or roving, or slubbing machine."

"What!" he cried. "I thought I understood you to say that you knew nothing about the work. How, then, do you know the names of these machines?"

"That is easily explained," she answered, with a slight smile. "I heard of the plentifulness of work here. I went to the library, and read up the whole process. Technically, I know of all that takes place from bale breaking to making the thread. I thought of weaving first, but it struck me as being much more complicated."

"You are a strange girl," was his answer. "You certainly deserve to succeed, and I am inclined to give you the opportunity which you seek. You have made me curious to ascertain whether a novice can pick up what we have always thought must come after a long apprenticeship. You shall have

the chance you seek. Come with Kitty Medster to-morrow morning, and I will myself give you your first lesson. Only remember," he went on, "this is simply a matter of business. If you do properly, you will be kept on; if you fail, you must not be surprised if you are discharged. And you will be treated precisely as the other hands are, neither better nor worse. Think what it means."

"I have quite comprehended that, sir."

"And you still wish to make the trial?"

"If you please, sir."

"Then come to-morrow as I have directed. Good-night, and I hope that you will be happy and successful."

"A strange girl," he mused, as he came away. "An intellectual girl. What will Dwite say when I tell him how she has studied the whole thing? She speaks like a lady of refinement, too. I certainly shall be interested in watching the result of the experiment."

"Well, lass, wot luck?" asked John Medster, when, the visitor having gone, Mary rejoined the family.

"I am to go in the morning with Kitty," she answered. "Mr. Berri-meed——"

"Call him Mestur Marshall, lass. Nobry speaks o' him as Mestur Berri-meed," corrected John Medster.

"Mr. Marshall says that he will give me my first lesson himself."

"Mestur Marshall is a real good gentleman!" cried Mrs. Medster. And Kitty danced round.

"Happen yo' 'ull be near me," she said. "If yo' are Aw can show yo' how to get on."

"Most loike it 'ull be so," Tom said. "Aw hope it 'ull be, fo' we'se aw got to be thankful to yo', Mary, fo' aw yo' ha' done to help us, an' specially me. Aw'd ne'er ha' thought o' that wrinkle o' gettin' little Kit to talk. Aw'd ha' thought him too little to knaw wot he wor sayin'——"

"An' he spoke aat loike a little mon," added Kitty.

"He mun stay here wi' us now," put in Mrs. Medster, "th' little angel."

"I wanted to speak of that," said Mary. "You see, if I am to stay here, and have that room, I must pay you properly. Oh, I know!"—as there was a general shake of the head. "But, indeed, I must! I should not feel happy in doing otherwise. And I want to take little Kit under my care. I will pay for him, and he and little Charlie here will be splendid playmates."

"Talk to muther, lass—talk to muther. If tha wilt be inderpendent talk to muther," said John Medster. "Not that Aw loike thee th' less fo' it. Aw loike to be inderpendent mysel'. Tha talk to muther 'bout how much brass tha art to pay, and wotever hoo says, that Aw shall be contented to bide by."

And so it was settled, and Mary Grey that night sat as one of the Medster household; and when she took from her box a light blouse, short skirt, clogs, and shawl, and donned them, and asked how she looked, there was a general outburst of approval.

"Lewk!" cried John Medster. "Why, lass, tha' lewkest so pratty that tha will ha' aw the lads in th' place after thee!"

And Tom cried that it was so. But for all that, Tom gave Kitty a gentle hug and a look which seemed to say that one of the lads would never be after Mary, let her be as pretty as she might.

CHAPTER 5.
Brother and Sister.

SAMUEL BERRIMEED, the senior partner of the mill which bore his name, was one of the most respected men in the whole district. Father and son, the Berrimeeds had been spinners for generations; in the old days, before Arkwright invented his machine, they were well known and in good repute, and that repute had not lessened as years passed. Old mills had been pulled down, old ways abandoned; the Berrimeed Mill was one of the most prosperous in the cotton districts, and Samuel Berrimeed was universally looked up to by his equals and liked by his workers.

Tall, stately, with grey hair and side-whiskers, with clear, searching eyes, unbending in integrity, with a keen sense of honour, hating anything approaching meanness or trickery, with lips that were never soiled by a lie—such was Samuel Berrimeed, justice of the peace, and twice mayor of the place.

His home was beautiful as taste and wealth could make it; and habits simple; his love and interest centred in his wife, his son, and daughter.

That wife was not the mother of his children; she, his first love, had died long ago, when the boy was but a child and the daughter but an infant. And Samuel Berrimeed, after two years' bereavement, had married again, the marriage, unlike some second ones, proving happy in the extreme. The children, hardly able to remember their own parent, adored their step-mother, and she loved them as her own—loved them for their own sakes as well as for their father's, and she loved him truly; while he thought, and openly said, that there was not his wife's equal in all the world. In his eyes she was the acme of perfection, of truth, and nobility of character. Such was the home influence which had surrounded Marshall Berrimeed and Olive, his sister, from their childhood upwards. They had been nurtured in all that was good, their every talent fostered, their lives moulded with unceasing and devoted care.

It mattered not that Marshall was to be owner of the mill in the end; he loved literature, and he was encouraged to write. Olive adored music, and the best masters were procured for her.

Little wonder was it, then, that the brother and sister, brought up amidst such surroundings, not only revered their parents, but loved each other with an affection all too rarely found. They shared each other's joys and sorrows, confided to each other their secrets and hopes, and devoted themselves to each other's happiness and their parents' comfort.

Such was the home to which Marshall Berrimeed returned one evening after a busy day about a month after Mary Grey had first applied for work at the mill.

Mr. and Mrs. Berrimeed were out, and only Olive was at home to greet her brother, which she did with rapturous delight, running out to meet him, and waving a copy of a magazine in her hand.

Olive Berrimeed was slight and graceful as a fairy, and yet in her face was expressed something of her brother's strength of character and resolve; and also, oddly contrasting with her happy spirit, and yet adding a subtle dignity to it, a trace of her father's proud nature—a healthy, not a vicious pride.

"Marshall, Marshall—look!" she cried, as she greeted him with a sisterly kiss. "Look at this critique on your articles in the 'New Empire.' Read what it says. 'High literary ability, great promise, clear insight. We expect to hear far more of the author. Is it not splendid?'"

"Far too complimentary," he answered, as he took the magazine and

scanned the pages; and yet his features flushed with pleasure as he read. "Signed by 'Lucius,'" he said. "A nom de plume, of course! Well, all I can say is that 'Lucius,' whoever he may be, has done me a great favour."

"Father and mother were so pleased," the girl went on; "and, oh, there is a little story of mill life by the same writer! Father says it shows an almost perfect knowledge of life in a mill. Only, I think that it takes the side of the worker a little too much, and makes out that masters should not let them work such long hours."

"There would soon be grumbling if we did not," he answered, with a smile. "But it is true, nevertheless. I often think that it is a pity to see the way they live—work and sleep, work and sleep. Perhaps a mad orgie on Saturday, and the evils of the music-halls, and then a worse madness during their holidays. The writer is right, Olive, though how it can be altered I do not see. There is a vast field for social work amongst them, if only there were those who would devote themselves to it."

He closed the book, and they went in, and the girl looked at him in silence for a few minutes; then she went to his side, and put her arm round his neck. He looked at her and smiled.

"Well, little sis, what now?" he asked.

And she answered:

"Marshall, we have never had any secrets from each other, and we have always shared each other's troubles."

"Why, yes, sis, that is so; and I hope that we always shall, dear."

"So do I. But, Marshall, I have thought lately that you have some secret, some trouble. I do not know how you are different, but you are not just the same. And you seem worried, brother, and moody. Is anything the matter, dear? Anything that you can tell to me?"

He was silent for a while, his brow was gloomy, and she watched him anxiously; she felt doubly sure now that she had reason for her suspicions.

"What is troubling you, Marshall?" she asked again; and he laughed, a trifle shamefacedly.

"Your eyes are keen, dear. I confess that I am worried and perplexed—ay, and angry with myself. Look you, Olive, you have always considered me to be level-headed and sensible, and not likely to give way to romance or nonsense."

"Well?" she asked, keeping a steadfast gaze upon him.

"Well"—he spoke irritably—"I have always considered myself the same, and yet I am making a fool of myself. I know it. I am doing it against my will. There, I will take you into my confidence, dear, and then I suppose that you will laugh at me. About a month since a girl came to the mill asking for work. She saw Dwite, and he turned her away. She came from London, and knew nothing of spinning."

"Poor thing!" murmured Olive thoughtfully.

"So I thought. I saw her in the yard; some of the men were annoying her—and when I heard her story, I told her that I would see what I could do for her. I gave her a place at the mill, and she is doing very well."

"Yes?" said Olive, feeling vaguely uneasy.

"Now, Olive, the strange thing is this. This girl is not a working girl. She is a lady—I can see it—one used to good society, and she is refined and clever. For instance, I found that before she came here she had actually studied some works upon spinning, and, in theory, knew all the process. Think of that! And, Olive, she is—do not be vexed, dear—the most beautiful girl that I ever met."

"Yes?" very softly this time; and he went on:

"Can you not understand, dear? Perhaps you cannot, for I cannot understand it myself. I cannot get her out of my thoughts. Oh," he added, "there has been nothing said. Our relationships are solely those of master and worker. I have not treated her differently to any other girl, and she has not comported herself differently in any way; but—but—Olive, you will laugh at me—though I have not said a word, though she has shown no sign, and probably thinks nothing of it, I—I must own it—I love her! There, it is out. I, junior partner of the mill, love this unknown mill girl. I cannot help it. I know it is madness. I know it would break my father's heart, and that I must tear it out of my life, and yet the fact remains—I love her—and no other woman will ever take her place in my life."

"Oh, Marshall, my poor brother!" the girl exclaimed, in consternation.

She knew him too well to think that he spoke lightly. If Marshall made such a declaration, it was with good grounds.

"I know it is wrong," he went on. But she shook her head.

"I do not say that, for you have fought against it. Only, I am so sorry. Would it not be better to discharge her, and so get rid of the——"

"No, no, I cannot be unfair! She came here seeking work, and she has worked well. Whatever she may have been, she behaves just as well as a hand could; and even those who looked black at first, are beginning to like her. And she is exercising a very good influence over some of the girls who were wild. I cannot shut my eyes to it. Why, when the men are near her, you hardly ever hear one of them use bad language; I cannot comprehend it, only everyone seems under the influence of her beauty. No, it would not be fair to harm her, just to protect myself——"

"You have made me curious, Marshall," Olive said slowly. "I would like to see this girl for myself. Can I come to-morrow, and you take me over the mill?"

"Yes. Keep my secret, little sister. I know it is a vain thing, but I would not have father or mother disturbed over it. It is a weakness. I must ask Heaven to help me conquer."

He rose and went to his room; he had some correspondence to see to, and she remained seated there, pondering thoughtfully. It was a trouble, indeed. Knowing her father as she did, she could see no way out of it for her brother other than doing as he said he must—holding his peace, and bearing it bravely.

But the next day Olive went to the mill, and, in her brother's company, went over it. Men and women smiled at her as she passed, for they all loved her. There was never a trouble but what Miss Olive would be willing to help if she knew. And so at last they came to the room where Kitty and Mary were employed, and Kitty looked up and exclaimed to her friend:

"Gracious! Look, Mary! If Miss Olive has not come to-day! 'Tis Mr. Marshall's sister."

The girl looked round, but instantly busied herself again with her work; and a brighter tint of colour crept to her cheek as her employer and the lady by his side came towards them.

Olive knew Kitty and smiled at her, and Kitty curtsied. She would not have done that to Mr. Marshall, nor to the master himself; but somehow with Miss Olive it was different.

"Well, Kitty, and how are you, and how are all your folk?" said Olive; and then she turned and glanced at Mary—glanced earnestly and carefully. The two women's eyes met steadily, look for look as equals, and then Olive said:

"And this is the new worker, Marshall?"

"Yes, it is Mary Grey; she comes from London. She is proving a good worker, too. This is my sister," he added, turning to Mary—he never called

her by her Christian name, as others did, and yet he could not call her Miss Grey.

Mary drew back; her hand swept to her skirt with a natural and easy gesture; she was in the act of bowing and holding out her other hand, when she checked herself, and, following Kitty's example, curtsied—it must be confessed a trifle awkwardly.

The brother and sister moved on, and Marshall asked:

"Well, what do you think of her?"

"I hardly know how to answer. Apart from what you have told me, I am both puzzled and interested."

"Is she not beautiful?"

"I admit it, and, I should say, clever also; but—why, here is father, and a gentleman with him!"

It was as Olive said. Samuel Berrimeed entered the room, a tall and aristocratic gentleman at his side. Marshall frowned.

"Sir Digby Rulph," he muttered.

"Do you know him?" his sister asked.

"Yes. We met him in London a year ago. Father seemed very much struck with him, and invited him down; but I did not care for him."

"Why not?" asked Olive; and Marshall smiled.

"Candidly, I cannot answer that. He is polished, polite, affable, and yet the fact remains I do not like him. But here they come."

"Hallo, Marshall! Showing Olive round, eh? I have a visitor, you see. Sir Digby has taken me at my word, and run down to pay us a visit. Sir Digby, my daughter, Olive; Olive, my dear, Sir Digby Rulph, a gentleman your brother and myself met in London last year."

"Delighted to meet you, Miss Berrimeed. Charmed, I am sure. Mr. Marshall, I must congratulate you. I read a delightful little thing of yours in one of the magazines."

"Did you see the criticism in this month's 'New Empire'?" asked Olive; and Sir Digby shook his head.

"No, I cannot say that I have done so."

"It is by someone signing himself 'Lucius.' It is splendid."

"Then I doubly congratulate your brother. I heard you had quite a tragedy, too, down here last month. A murder."

"Ah, a very strange affair," said the mill-owner, shaking his head. "I don't suppose that we shall ever get to the bottom of it now."

"I thought that some girl, some mill-worker, found a clue or something; at least, that was the impression I had."

"Yes. There was something found and handed to the police; what it was has never been divulged. The girl, by the way, is an interesting study. She came from London seeking work. She saw my manager, and Dwite, he is a man without an atom of romance in him, sent her about her business. But Marshall here must needs interfere and take her on; and if all I hear is correct, she is certainly a good worker. I do not interfere with the details myself, you know."

"She is working in this very room, father," said Olive. "Marshall pointed her out to me."

"Indeed," said Sir Digby, "you arouse my curiosity. Might I have her pointed out to me?"

"Marshall, just take us past the machine," said his father; and Marshall frowned. Somehow his heart disliked this exhibiting of Mary Grey, but he saw no way of declining; and so the party strolled on, past one winder after another, until they came to Kitty and Mary.

"We are passing the girl now," he said, in low tones—the clang of the

machines covered his speech—and Sir Digby turned to stare, and then stepped back with an exclamation of surprise.

Marshall looked from him to the girl, but Mary was tending her work unconcernedly; only he fancied that upon her cheeks there was a heightened colour.

"Is anything the matter? Do you know the girl?" asked Samuel Berrimeed; and his guest laughed.

"No! Oh, no! I was struck with her likeness to someone, that is all. No, I don't know her in the least."

"That man is lying," thought Marshall. "He knows her—I am sure that he does." And a strange, uneasy feeling came over him. How could it be that Sir Digby knew Mary Grey? And yet—and yet—was not Mary Grey herself plainly a girl who had at some time moved in good society?

He looked back; the girls were working as if nothing had occurred; they were used to visitors coming round, and took no notice of them; but Marshall could have sworn that Mary had stopped and was gazing after his father's guest.

"Olive," he whispered, as they went on, "did you notice anything?"

"I did," she answered. "I saw that quick look pass. I think that Mary Grey knows Sir Digby Rulph; and I am sure that Sir Digby Rulph knows her."

CHAPTER 6.

Tom Rhole's Troubles.

WHEN Marshall Berrimeed told his sister Olive that Mary Grey was exercising a beneficial influence over the lives of her fellow-labourers, he spoke no more than the truth. Quietly and unostentatiously, hardly realising how much she was doing, though she had set herself to the task, certainly without those whom she sought to help being aware of any change, the "lass fro' Lunnon," as she was generally called, had laboured, and the results were making themselves seen.

It had not been easy work. Lancashire, in spite of its kindly heart, is slow to receive strangers, and especially strangers who come to take up its work, and at first Mary Grey had been looked upon with suspicion.

As soon as she was engaged at the mill she joined the girls' union, and she was so gentle and inoffensive, and yet, in some strange way, they all felt that she was superior to them. That feeling produces resentment oft-times, but in this case resentment was impossible. Somehow they could not help loving Mary and looking to her for advice and comfort in their difficulties and sorrows.

The Medsters were attendants at the local Methodist chapel, a plain-looking little place, where these simple-hearted worshippers gathered after the custom of their forefathers, listened to fervid and heart-searching addresses, and offered up their humble prayers. The chapel was a branch; it had a local steward, and only on special occasions did the minister from the larger church at the end of the town come down to visit them.

To this chapel the Medsters went, and it had been a signal triumph for Kitty when she had persuaded her Tom to accompany her thither. For at first Tom had been decidedly averse to all "religion," and he had said that "he couldn't abide preachin'." But love and patience had triumphed in the end, Tom had accompanied Kitty, and had heard her "Amens" when at a prayer-meeting conversions were being sought for; and on one occasion, after a more than usually fervid address, Tom had found himself at the

penitent form, and had seen Kitty's tears of joy when he made his first public profession of faith.

And with Tom Rhole it was a motto to do a thing well if you did it at all; so he threw himself heart and soul into the chapel work. He had a good voice, and he sang in the choir; he became a teacher in the Sunday-school; he forthwith gave up boon companions and visits to the music-halls and the theatre, and he was no more to be seen spending his time and money in the bars of the public-house. As his former companions said, "Tom had got religion, an' got it t' reets."

And the greatest, the crowning joy, was when the super. put Tom's name on the preaching list. Oh, the stupendous importance of that morning when her Tom "preached his fust sermon"! Kitty, in her daydreams, looked away to the time when he should become a "local" and perhaps go to college, and—and be a minister himself. Kitty, in her simple way, was ambitious, and to see her Tom a minister, and herself a minister's wife, in some little primitive hamlet, was the very acme of her hopes.

And to this chapel, with the Medsters, Mary had gone from the first, and Mary also could sing—sing solos at after-meetings—and play, too, if the organist chanced to be away. And Mary, too, took a Sunday-school class of elder girls, and that was the beginning of the institute.

The boys had an institute—not a very successful one. It is to be feared that its attractions did not rival those of the streets, and it was but poorly attended. Mary thought the girls ought to have one. They, after being cooped up in the mills all day, wanted some recreation, and that furnished by the street and music-hall, to which far too many of them were prone to go, was, in her eyes, very doubtful. Mary saw that the boys' institute had failed, simply because it provided no recreation. A few old books, a lecture—perhaps a prayer-meeting—all very good in their way, but not good enough. Mary's idea was more ambitious—a parlour instead of a bare room, with a piano and cosy chairs, and everything nice.

Mary sought the local superintendent and unfolded her plan, and was snubbed—utterly and severely snubbed. Mr. Hibble was one of the old school men—intensely loyal to his belief, but narrow and hard in his views; one who believed in what Mary called "uncomfortable religion," and put his belief into practice.

A tall, thin man, with long face, the upper lip shaven, and a straggly grey fringe of beard upon his chin—a fringe which, cut square, made the face look still harder.

Mr. Hibble would have none of the institute upon her lines. She might have a mid-week class, or anything of that kind; but piano and songs, and all things of that sort, were snares of Satan, and to be shunned.

But a girl of Mary Grey's character—one who could come all the way from London seeking for work—was not to be daunted. There was a little unused hall near belonging to the Established Church, and Mary saw the vicar, much to that good man's astonishment, and offered to rent the place, unfolding to him her plans.

Now, the vicar was also a sensible man. He asked the girl how she proposed to provide for the rent, and Mary was ready with her answer. She knew a lady in London who, she was sure, would let her have the money—the vicar could have it paid in advance if he so desired.

The vicar, knowing Marshall Berrimeed, spoke with him, and the two saw the superintendent of the circuit, and discussed with him; and the result was that they agreed that the girl should be allowed to make the experiment. If she got the money, well and good; if she failed, they did not much mind.

So three weeks after her coming Mary Grey opened her institute. She

had furnished the little hall comfortably; there was a piano and easy-chairs, all procured with the money from the lady in London. It was more comfortable than many of the homes, and she invited her class and some of the younger girls from the mill to attend.

It was a success. There was a tea, and no preaching nor "jawing," but a nice song or two, and pictures, and books and games; and the institute was to be open three nights a week. Before the first week had gone its attendance had doubled, and some of the young women, who had heard of it from their younger sisters, looked in, and seemed inclined to look in again. Four weeks, and the success was certain; and Marshall Berrimeed discussed with the vicar and their Wesleyan friend—and they were friends and brother workers—and declared that this must be watched, that it might be the beginning of a very good and much needed work.

Five weeks, and things were going strong, and Annie Medster was entirely captured. For Annie had been the Medsters' wild bird. She had taken after "poor Bertha" with the same love of flattery and finery, and the same propensities for "gadding about wi' the boys," and now Mary had got her, and Annie kept the register of the members of the institute, and, as Mrs. Medster declared: "Th' lass wod live theer if hoo had th' chance."

So far had Mary's work gone. No one could say that she tried to put on airs, or set herself up; but everyone felt her influence, and, as Marshall Berrimeed confessed to Olive, even the men seemed to pull themselves up and put a check upon their tongues when Mary Grey was about.

But though his superintendent favoured the business, Mr. Hibble, and a few old folk like himself, who could not understand young life, looked upon it with disfavour. Mr. Hibble felt hurt. The minister ought to have backed him up instead of seeming to favour this London girl with her strange ways and notions. Mr. Hibble felt called upon to administer a rebuke to the Medsters, to teach them to understand that he was, in so far as the chapel went, their spiritual head. He could not do that in any save one way. He struck at the one weak spot, not in any petty spite, but in that bitter, acrid spirit of duty, which in the past had made many an otherwise good Christian become a tyrant and persecutor—the spirit of bigotry. He struck the Medsters through Tom Rhole.

For though Rhole had been acquitted by the coroner's jury, there were plenty there who forgot that of Charity it has been said that it is greater than Faith or Hope.

"Something must have been behind it all," they said. "It was all very well for the jury; but, after all, it was only the London girl's cleverness. She might have put little Kit up to talking as he had talked. And as to that clue they spoke of, nobody knew what it was. Tom Rhole was the last person seen at Margaret Hall's; and, anyway, he had no business to have been daddling about after her when he was engaged to Kitty Medster. If the Medsters had been properly-minded people they would have sent him to the rightabout, let the coroner's jury say what they might."

In this way did unkind tongues speak, and Mr. Hibble listened, and did not rebuke. The Church must be defended from any whisper of scandal; the worker must, like Cæsar's wife, be above suspicion; and Mr. Hibble and his fellow-workers determined that Tom Rhole's name should be removed from the list of preachers.

They informed Tom of this with all due solemnity, and Tom—it was the same day that Marshall Berrimeed had brought his sister to the mill—came round to the Medsters' in the evening full of resentment and bitterness.

"Why, wors amiss wi' thi, lad?" demanded John Medster, when he caught sight of the young fellow's face. "Surely yo' an' Kitty are noan quarrellin' ageean?"

"Naa, feyther"—Tom had got into the way of calling John "father"—
 "dunna yo' fear that. Aw'se goin'- to tak' care noan to dew that. It's
 anuther lumber, an' it's made me feel fair capt. It's aw Dicky Pink wi'
 me at th' chapel."

"Wor on earth a' yo' talkin' about?" demanded John Medster, open-eyed.
 "Wor's wrong at th' chapel?"

"Mr. Hibble says Aw'm noan to be on th' plan ony more."

"Tha'rt noan on th' plan?" repeated John Medster, laying aside his pipe.
 "Why not, lad? Aw dunna understand."

"He says that my name's too much mixed oop wi' the business abaat
 Marg'ret Hall. Aw told him that th' coroner's jury said Aw was innocent;
 bud he says it ain't certain. He says that theer's a doubt, and th' Church
 munna ha' a mon whoa hasna clean hands. Aw's tried my best to walk
 straight. Aw made a fool o' mysel' about Marg'ret, but Aw've noan cause
 fo' shame bud fo' daddlin' after th' woman when Aw was walkin' aat wi'
 Kitty. But he says he's noan satisfied. And sum o' th' others, they've
 been shakin' their yeds and lewkin' queer at me ever since. Ef Aw'm not
 guid enough fo' the preachin' Aw'm not guid enough to go theer at all.
 Aw've tried my best, fo' Kitty's sake, bud theer's an end of it."

"Huist wi' you, Tom!" answered John Medster. "Aw doan't under-
 stan' this lumber, nor wor Mestur Hibble is oop to. Super woodna' agree
 to that, Aw'll be bound. Dunna yo' tak' it to heart too much."

"Woodna yo' fak' it to heart," demanded Tom, "if iverbry wor a-sayin'
 that you' were a murderer? Aw'll not put oop wi' it! Aw feel fair leetsome
 abaat it."

"Dunna fluster yorsel'," said John Medster kindly. "Aw knaws it comes
 a bit hard. Aw conna think wor th' ferrups Hibble is oop to. Bud Aw
 doan't think Aw wo'd tak' it so hard, lad. Heer's Kitty. Yo' go an' talk
 wi' her, an' let her comfort yo'. A true lass is th' best comforter a mon
 has, after aw."

And so it happened that when Kitty and Mary came in they found Tom
 there, looking as cheerful, as John Medster said, as a "draanin' ratten."
 And, oh, how indignant they both felt when they heard his story!

But there was more than indignation with Kitty—there was fear. She
 knew Tom, and she was frightened that if he once went off from the chapel
 he might go back to his old ways. That was his nature. He was heart and
 soul for anything he took up, but if he got disappointed he was apt to throw
 it aside for good.

"Doan't yo' grieve abaat it, Tom," she said, as she took her place by his
 side. "Mester Hibble, he is grumpy. He's angert neaw, because of th'
 institute, and he doan't loike us goin' theer."

"It's noan only Mester Hibble," groaned Tom, "it's iverbry! They
 woan't believe me, an' they whispers and nods, and says that only mesel' an'
 th' owd boy knaws why Aw went to Marg'ret's haase that neet."

"But they are wrong, Tom," put in Mary softly; "and you are wrong,
 too. You forget that there is One who knows, and that He, in His good
 time, will make it plain."

"It's aw reet fo' yo' to talk, Mary," answered Tom moodily. "Yo' havna
 people talkin' abaat yo'. Oh, Mary, if yo' knaws onything, why doan't yo'
 speak aat? Wor was it yo' found in Marg'ret's house?"

"I cannot tell you, Tom; I can tell nobody. It may mean much, it may
 mean nothing. Surely you can be brave for a little while! If they won't
 let you preach, you can preach a better sermon by living this down patiently
 and prayerfully."

"Aw conna! Aw'll do summat desp'rate soon, Aw knaw. Aw think
 Aw'll go an' 'list——"

"Oh, Tom," cried Kitty in dismay, "yo'll break my heart if yo' do!"

"Why shouldna Aw do it, lass?" he asked. "Aw wod cum back then, efter Aw'd served my toime, an' Aw'd be able to show 'em that Aw'd been a mon, an' done my duty——"

"Do not talk so, Tom," put in Mary kindly. "I know how this makes you feel; but you will be a braver soldier and show them that you are a better man by just bearing patiently. Now, you take my advice, and come round to church with us, as if nothing had happened."

"Wot? Me come to th' place efter th' way they've treated me? Not me! It 'ull be a long day afore Aw darkens the doors o' that place ageean!"

"Oh, Tom," pleaded Kitty, "dunna talk so, Tom! Aw want yo' to do as Mary says, and come, an' tak' no notice o' wor awmbry has said."

"Aw wunna, Aw say!" he repeated doggedly. "Aw ha' tried, an' this is how Aw's treated. Aw'd ha' spent every bodle Aw'd got on th' place. Aw was prewd o' belongin' to it. But Aw's got my proide, an' when Aw's treated so, Aw'm noan goin' to put my yed in th' place ageean. Ef they are so frightened o' being shawmed by me, Aw'll jack th' whole thing oop!"

"Oh, Tom!" Kitty pleaded; and then she began to cry.

Tom hated to see her cry. He felt he was a brute. And yet he could not bring himself to go back to the chapel. Pride and temper were combined, and not even the sight of Kitty's tears could move him.

"Aw dunna want to see tha shriek, lass," he said. "Aw wod ha' done onything to please tha, an' that's the truth. Bud 'tain't fair to ask me to go theer. Ef that's Christian ways, Aw doan't want noan of them. Ef Aw'd been as bad, they ought to ha' gi'en me a hand an' helped me oop, not ha' tried to kick me down."

"Kitty," said Mary calmly to her friend, "dry your eyes. Tom feels bad, and he is bound to feel bad over this, and it is hardly to be expected that he feels like coming round to the chapel to-night."

"Aw doan't feel loike it, oather," sobbed Kitty. "Aw feel as if Aw'd loike to just gi' scopperil belltinker to Mestur Hibble! Bud Aw's goin'."

"Happen yo' wodna want to if they had said o' yo' wor they've said o' me," answered Tom.

"Happen Aw wodna," she replied. "Bud if yo' said to me, 'Kitty, Aw want yo' to come,' Aw'd come, because Aw luv yo', Tom."

Tom could not stand it. He felt that he should yield if he stayed there much longer; and that he was determined not to do. He had been wounded sorely, and he would not go back now. He put on his hat and went out.

"Aw only make you shriek," he said, half sullenly. "Aw'll come back when tha' hast quietened thyself." And with that he went.

But, alas! Tom did not come back. Tom was in a tumult of temper, and he was angry with himself now because he had made Kitty cry. He went into the town, and he met old companions. They would not turn away from him and cram the murder of Margaret Hall down his throat! They would be glad to receive him.

Tom went with them. One old haunt after another was visited, and the result was only too easy of attainment. Tom Rhole became intoxicated, and was locked up.

He was brought up the next morning and fined; and then, instead of doing what he ought to have done, and going back penitently and confessing to his folly, he, convinced that he was, in his own words, "a bad egg," went straight off to the depot and enlisted.

And then, the thing done, and past undoing, the full realisation of his

folly came upon him. What would Kitty do? What would Kitty say? And his mother—his old mother who depended upon him?

“Aw’m a fool!” he said to himself. “An’ Aw’ve come to my cake an’ milk, an’ th’ sooner Aw clear aat an’ leave Kitty fo’ sum better mon th’ better it will be.”

And, with that bitter reflection, Tom Rhole went back to tell the Medsters what he had done, and to bid a final farewell to his sweetheart.

CHAPTER 7.

A Sudden Faintness.

“**H**ERE we are, my dear Sir Digby!” Samuel Berrimeed’s motor-car turned into the grounds of his beautiful home as he spoke. “This is Oakhurst Park, and you are welcome to make it your home as long as you care to do so. I am afraid that we cannot offer you either the excitement or luxury of London; but if you are not comfortable here, it will be your fault and not ours.”

“I have little fear of being anything but comfortable. I know your Lancashire hospitality, Mr. Berrimeed,” laughed Sir Digby in response. Then he continued: “A charming spot—beautifully laid out, too! I congratulate you upon your taste, Mr. Berrimeed. You must have an excellent gardener over the men.”

“There is my head-gardener,” laughed the mill-owner, pointing to Olive—“or, rather, one of the two. She and her mother take all responsibility in this direction. They design, and see that the men execute their wishes.”

“A fair gardener,” replied Sir Digby, giving Olive a profound bow. “Ah, after all, is not the garden woman’s sphere? Was she not the chief ornament in that first garden—”

“The chief stumbling-block,” said Mr. Berrimeed slyly. Then, seeing a slight frown upon Marshall’s face, he went on, changing from the subject: “Here is the house. I am afraid that we shall find my wife out. She is generally visiting at this hour. It is somewhat earlier than our usual dinner-hour. However, we can have a cigar and a stroll round, and so pass the time.”

They alighted, and passed in, and Mr. Berrimeed said to his daughter:

“Olive, my dear, see if your mother has returned. I do not suppose that she has. Tell one of the servants to go for Sir Digby’s luggage. It is at the station. Now, Sir Digby, let me conduct you to your room.”

“Why do I not like that man?” mused Marshall to himself, as he saw their guest follow his father. “I feel as if— Oh, fancy—only fancy! I am all fancies now, I think.”

He turned and went into the grounds.

“I have been mistaken; and yet I could have sworn that there was a look of recognition between him and Mary. Olive noticed it, too! I must ask him about it. And yet”—he smiled sadly—“what is it to do with me? It makes no difference. Mary Grey is not for me, and I must conquer or bury this wild love.”

Olive came out to him—they had not been able to talk together since their father and Sir Digby had joined them.

“Well, little sister, now that we have a moment to ourselves, tell me just what you think. Is your brother a very great fool?”

“Marshall, do not talk in that way. I do not like you to speak so of yourself. You are not a great fool—you are wise enough to recognise that a temptation has come into your pathway—”

"No, no, Olive, not a temptation!" he said quickly. "I cannot call Mary Grey that!"

"Yet she is proving a temptation. You desire to do something which would be a terrible disappointment to father—that in itself is a temptation. Marshall, either you must conquer this, or the girl must go. It is one or the other."

"To send the girl away would be unfair!"

"It may be needful. You cannot go away. You know you are needed here."

He was silent for a little while, and then asked suddenly: "Is she a lady?"

"I can hardly answer. I am perplexed. She is very pretty; nay, more than pretty—she is beautiful. Her features are refined also, and she has been used to society's ways. I noticed how, when you said that I was your sister, she drew herself up, and was stepping back for a bow, when she seemed to recollect herself and curtsied, and she is not used to curtsying. She interests me so far. I should like to try and find out what her past has been."

"No, no, dear," he cried hastily, "that would be unkind! She has hidden it. A story of a sudden turn of fortune's wheel; poverty instead of wealth, perhaps; a singular independent disposition, which will not stay amidst old scenes, in altered circumstances. A determined effort to fight. Olive, the girl is good and true, or she would not have the influence over other girls for good that she undoubtedly possesses. You talk of her going! Ask the vicar what he thinks—ask Mr. Chepworth, from the Wesleyan church, what he thinks. They both agree that she has a wonderful influence for good."

"Then you must not hinder that; and if you were to show in any way the real state of your feelings you would hinder it," answered Olive. "My brother, this is something which can, and which must, be conquered. You know, viewed from what standpoint you like, the thing is utterly impossible. It could not be! I am sure that father would never listen to it; and surely you would do nothing to bring about an estrangement between yourself and he?"

"No; I cannot do that," Marshall acknowledged.

"Then you must be determined, and conquer. It can be conquered, you know, and—— But hush! Here he comes!"

Samuel Berrimeed stepped out on to the lawn, and advanced to his son and daughter.

"Upon my word," he said, "I feel quite delighted at having Sir Digby come down. He treated us very well while we were in London, didn't he, Marshall?"

"Yes, sir."

Marshall spoke with some hesitation. He could not see where the good treatment came in, beyond the fact of Sir Digby having tacked himself on to them, and, while taking them to this function and that, getting luncheons and dinners for nothing.

"Hang it, boy, don't speak so grudgingly. I am sure that he devoted himself to us. Now he is here, I want him to thoroughly enjoy himself. I want him to have a real good time. We must let things go a bit, Marshall. Dwite can look after them. We can get him a little good shooting and fishing, and—and all that sort of thing."

"We will do all we can, father, of course," replied Marshall; and his father nodded and laughed.

"Of course—of course! Lancashire must not be behind London in hospitality."

Meanwhile, the guest, in a splendidly appointed room, was standing at the glass, surveying himself critically.

"It might be dangerous," he mused. "But I do not think so. I have altered a good deal since then. But that girl in the mill! Confound it, she gave me quite a shock! I quite thought it was her ladyship; and if it was, things would be all up with me. But that is absurd! A chance likeness—that is all. Nothing more than that.

"Now let me consider," he went on. "If I play my cards properly, it ought to be a very good investment; only that fool of a son does not like me. I can see that as plain as I can see anything. Well, we will wait and see. I have not been introduced to the wife yet, and if—if it is according to my information, I shall have everything in my hands. By George, it is the boldest stroke I have played yet in the whole course of a somewhat adventurous career! A very bold stroke!"

He glanced from the window—he saw the mill-owner and Marshall and Olive below, and he smiled again.

"I don't see any flaws in my plan. Whatever comes of it, it is bound to be profitable for me. Ah, my pretty Miss Berrimeed, I don't know but what it would pay me to settle down as a respectable married man now! And in that case—ah, yes! in that case—but I must wait until I have been introduced to the estimable Mrs. Berrimeed before I make up my mind."

He turned away, and, going down the broad staircase with its heavy carpeting, he went out to where his host awaited him.

"Now, this is a perfect paradise," he said. "The sort of thing to make a weary man perfectly contented."

"Then I sincerely hope that we have a weary man in our midst, Sir Digby," said Olive brightly, "in which case we may hope to have a contented man also."

"The man who is not content here ought to be banished to the middle of the Desert of Gobi, to learn what he has failed to appreciate before."

"Do you play bowls, Sir Digby?" asked Samuel Berrimeed. "I have a fine lawn. It is an old man's game, they say, but I enjoy it. Let the young people play at tennis or croquet, if they like. Give me a quiet game at bowls."

"I shall be delighted to oppose you," replied Sir Digby, and Samuel Berrimeed laughed again.

"Good—I will take you at singles—or Olive and I will play you and Marshall. Olive plays a good game."

"In which case I ought to have her for a partner," said Sir Digby, "seeing that I myself am but an indifferent player."

"Come along, then!"

"But mother will be back soon, and then it will be dinner!" protested Marshall. He did not like the idea of playing, especially when Olive was playing as Sir Digby's partner against himself. He was growing very irritable with himself at his "folly," as he called it, and yet that folly was growing also. He did not, and he could not, like Sir Digby Rulph.

"Nonsense—nonsense!" said Samuel Berrimeed. "We have a good half-hour yet. Come and lend me a hand. If Olive is playing against us, we shall have all our work cut out."

So the balls were got, the jack thrown, and the game began; and Marshall took an evil pleasure in striving to beat Sir Digby. But he soon realised that the latter, in spite of his modest disclaimer, was a better player than himself, and again and again his own bowl was knocked aside, and Sir Digby's, in close conjunction with Olive's, lay there close to the jack.

"Sir Digby," Olive laughed, "you have underrated your skill. You play very well."

"The result of having such a sweet and skilled partner," replied Sir Digby gallantly; and Marshall bit his lips. It seemed to him that Sir Digby knew that he was irritating him, and took a keen delight in doing so.

"There is mother," he said, with something of relief, as a carriage drove in from the gates; and Olive nodded and raced off.

"I will tell her that Sir Digby is here," she laughed. "You can have one more round if you want to."

"No; I have had enough!" replied her father, beaten ignominiously. "Sir Digby, if you are what you call an indifferent player, I should like to see what you call a good one. However, come along—let me introduce you to my wife."

"Now for it," was Sir Digby's reflection, as he accompanied his genial host. "If it is as I hope——"

Olive and Mrs. Berrimeed came across the lawn. The mill-owner's wife was a tall, dignified woman, and it needed no second glance to see the esteem in which she was held by her stepchildren.

"My dear," her husband said, as she came up, "I have a friend here—a friend whom I first met in London, and who has done me the honour of coming down to spend a little time with us. Sir Digby Rulph, my wife—my dear——"

"Mrs. Berrimeed is surely ill!" cried Sir Digby; and the others there uttered exclamations of dismay. For Mrs. Berrimeed, as she looked at her husband's guest, suddenly turned very white, raised her hands, as if to push away some horrible threatening calamity, and then fell prostrate, senseless, upon the green velvet of that sunny lawn.

CHAPTER 3.

The First Breath of Suspicion.

"WHY have you come here?"

The question startled Sir Digby Rulph; he had been sitting alone, smoking contentedly. The sudden faintness of Mrs. Berrimeed had necessitated her remaining away from dinner; but, for all that, the meal had been pleasant.

The doctor, hastily summoned, had declared that there was no cause for alarm; that it was but a little weakness, due perhaps to being out too long in the heat of the day; and the patient herself had declared that, though she would not join them in the dining-room, she would come down afterwards. Sir Digby proved himself a brilliant conversationalist, and even Marshall had to confess that his dislike was unfounded, while the mill-owner was charmed and Olive delighted.

The dinner over, Samuel Berrimeed and Marshall had been called away. A message had come from Mr. Dwite, and it necessitated their consulting over certain business matters which needed immediate attention; so with apologies, and promises not to be long, they left their guest, he begging them not to consider him, since, as they had bidden him make himself at home, he was quite willing to take them at their word.

So, left alone, he had been smoking and meditating, when that question, asked, in a low, intense note, was breathed in his ear, and he turned, to see Mrs. Berrimeed standing beside him. She had entered unnoticed, and now stood before Sir Digby, her hands clenched, her face white and tense, and as he stared she repeated the question:

"Why have you come here?"

He laid down his cigar, and, rising, handed her a chair.

"My dear madam," he said, "what a question! Your husband invited me down, and I accepted."

"Because you knew—knew that I was here?"

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes and no. When I had the pleasure of meeting your husband I had no idea that his wife would prove to be an old acquaintance, but I heard it hinted about a fortnight ago by a friend of mine. Perhaps you will remember his name, Jacob Arstein. Ah, I see you do remember the genial Jacob! He told me how you had flown from old scenes and become a staid matron. I confess that I should never have thought of merry little Florry Carter, the pet of the music-halls twenty-five years ago, doing that. And yet, after all, it is the fashion now; it is the way in which we lose our bright particular stars—they become absorbed in the aristocracy."

She shuddered as she listened.

"And now?" she asked.

"Precisely. And now?"

"What will you do? I have kept my secret. No one knows of it. I hated that life. I was driven to it. I ran away and became a companion to a lady—that, at any rate, was free from the horror of the surroundings. I had escaped them——"

"And me?" he put in softly.

"And you? Yes, and you also. Now, do you mean to tell my husband that the wife he loves and honours was but a music-hall dancer, her father a companion of thieves, if not a thief himself?"

"And also," added Sir Digby softly, "that the said wife was once deeply in love with my poor self, and wrote me gushing letters."

"You—you——" she began, but words failed her. "Yes, it is true. Not that I loved you, but that I saw in you a chance of escaping from a life I hated. You posed as a rich man, and an honourable one. I soon found out what you really were—a cheat, like the rest——"

"We might speak more politely," he murmured.

"Plain speaking is best. I wrote you those letters——"

"Some of which are undated and bear no address. Why, they might have been received quite recently," he said, softly as a cat purring while it watches the struggles of its helpless victim.

She saw his meaning, and the white face went still paler.

"I see. Then there is but one thing to do. I must tell my husband and trust to his love."

"Eh?" He looked up quickly, startled out of his calmness—that was the last thing which he desired. "No, I don't think that. In the first place you have to think of him, and what a blow it might be; then of what you would lose—the respect of your stepson and daughter. I do not see the need for heroic measures."

"You told me once that you would have revenge——"

"Nonsense! I am too old for revenge now. I prefer profit. I shall bargain with you——"

"Blackmail me?"

"Pardon me—bargain with you," he replied calmly. "I shall offer my terms, you can accept or reject——"

"And your terms?" she said feverishly. "But how do I know that you would keep your word?"

"Ah, well, I may be able to satisfy you on that point. As to terms, I want to think that over. One thing I promise you—I will in no way compromise or betray you. All you have to do is to go on as you have done, and treat me as your husband's guest."

"And when shall I know?"

"As soon as I have determined. I will do nothing without speaking to you; then, if you choose to tell your husband, you can do so. Is it a bargain?"

"What?"

"That we go on as hostess and guest? You may be certain that I shall not betray you at all."

"What is your motive?" she asked. And he smiled again.

"I have grown to understand that it is a folly to act without due consideration. I meditate on everything that concerns me. Come—— Hush! Here your husband comes!"

"Ah, my dear Agues"—so Samuel Berrimeed cried as he entered—"this is better! You look more yourself. So you have found your way down and have been chatting with Sir Digby. Then there is no need for me to finish the introduction, since you have done that for yourselves. Most annoying that I was called away, Sir Digby, but business——"

"Must be attended to. Quite so, Mr. Berrimeed. But I assure you that I have not been lonely; Mrs. Berrimeed joined me almost as soon as you went."

"That's good!" cried the mill-owner. "Now, Olive—— Where is Olive?"

"Here, papa!" Olive entered as she spoke. "I had to run down to the other end of the grounds. Mamma dropped her bracelet when she fainted, and I have been to look for it. I found it quite safe."

"Now some music, my dear. Come, show Sir Digby what you can do! Sir Digby, I want to ask you a question."

Marshall, taking the opportunity offered while his sister was at the piano, had come to the other's side. He spoke in a low tone, and Sir Digby turned and answered him in the same key.

"Yes; what is it?"

"To-day, while we were in the works, you saw that girl who was instrumental in getting the man who was accused of murdering Margaret Hall, acquitted?"

Sir Digby hesitated a moment, then he replied:

"Yes. What of that?"

"I am somewhat interested in that girl's career," replied Marshall, endeavouring to speak carelessly. "I could not help thinking that you did recognise her. I speak plainly, but I mean no offence. I was under the impression that you had met her before?"

"Ah!" Sir Digby nodded. "But I told you that I had not," he went on. "Do you mean that you do not accept the statement?"

"Hardly that, but I want to ask you—are you certain you are not mistaken?"

"My dear fellow," said Sir Digby, "you put me in a very awkward fix. I cannot say that I am quite certain; but, on the other hand, I think that I am. I will explain to you; but, mind, it must not prejudice you against the girl. I was at a police-court some few years back as a witness. There were a gang of thieves being tried—genteel swindlers, shoplifters, and such like—and one of the number was a girl, the exact counterpart of your mill-hand. That is all. It is a thousand chances to one that I am making a mistake——"

"Or that, not making a mistake, you are doing this to try and screen the girl and let her have a chance?" put in Marshall. And Sir Digby was silent.

"I suppose that you had some sort of character or reference with her when she came?" he said presently. And Marshall shook his head.

"No; nothing."

"But that is unusual, is it not? Mind, I do not say that this is the girl, and I hope that nothing I have said may lead you to discharge her. If she is doing well here, that is all that need be asked for; and I do not see that she has now any possible chance of engaging in dishonest practices, even if she has a mind to do so."

"I can hardly think that she could be a girl of that sort. She seems cultured——"

"So was the girl whom I saw—a handsome and well-spoken girl. Evidently a clever one. But that is no cause for surprise. Unless these people were clever and well-spoken, they would stand little chance of success in their nefarious proceedings."

"Thank you!" said Marshall. And he rose and went away as Olive concluded the piece which she had been playing.

Sir Digby looked after him, a smile hovering about his lips.

"So, so!" he mused. "Another development! I must watch this. It may prove useful to me."

Then he paused, and looked grave.

"I must have been mistaken; it cannot be her ladyship. Absurd! What should she be doing down here? Well, anyhow, if this makes Marshall Berrimeed get rid of her—and I hope that it does—it will be the better for me. I do not like chances; and there is a chance, just a chance—her ladyship is prone to do remarkable things, I know."

Meanwhile Marshall Berrimeed had left the drawing-room and had sought the terrace outside. The words of Sir Digby had come as a shock to him. Was it possible, he asked himself, that he had been deceived—that Mary, instead of being the angel of perfection which he had told himself she was, was a swindler, a thief, one of the crowd of cheats which throng the great metropolis?

The thought was intolerable—it was agony! It seemed like a deadly insult to the girl, and he felt inclined to openly quarrel with Sir Digby for having made it. But then came the calmer reasoning of cold common-sense. This girl had come here with such a strange story, and she was taking up work which she was manifestly far superior to. Why? What more likely than that, having drawn the attention of the police upon herself, she should flee and bury her identity in this manner? A safe manner, for surely no one would think of looking for her here.

And there could be no reason for Sir Digby telling a lie. He had been so manifestly unwilling to answer his questioning. He had said, again and again, that he could not be positive. No, Sir Digby would not say this unless he had good grounds.

And behind that assertion that he was not positive there had been something which seemed to tell Marshall that he was certain—that he was seeking to screen the girl. Oh, it was horrible! And—and he loved her! Yes, he loved her, and nothing could alter that. He had looked upon her as a heroine, facing life's hard battle, and conquering in the fight; he had set her upon a pedestal; he had told himself that, if he could but gain his father's consent, a woman who was brave as Mary would be a prize among wives.

And to think that she might be a thief! He would not believe it—he could not believe it! He would put the horrible thought far away from him. Mary Grey was no thief! Every feature, every glance of her eyes, every word which fell from her lips, gave the lie to so foul a supposition. He would not believe it!

Alas! easy to say, but the doubt was there. It rankled in his soul like a

poisoned arrow. And how could he find out? How could he discover the truth? He wanted to do that—not to condemn, but to clear her—and yet how could he do it?”

He turned and went in. All was brightness and laughter indoors, and yet Marshall had no mind for it. The one—the only thing which possessed him now was the desire to get at the truth, and in doing that to demonstrate beyond question that Mary Grey, the woman who had won all his heart's love, was good, innocent, true—all that in his mind he had pictured her as being.

CHAPTER 9.

Mary's Promise.

TOM RHOLE had enlisted.

The tidings spread fast amongst the workers, and was received by them in more ways than one. Some—the uncharitable ones—always ready to put the worst motive to every action, said that it was the best thing he could do, and that the place would be well rid of him.

“He knaws that he's guilty,” they declared, “an' he's shawmed to show his face heer.”

Others said that Tom was foolish—and perhaps they were right.

“He ought to ha' stayed an' fought it aat,” they declared, “noan ha' runned away as if he was feart.”

But there were others who, while admitting that Tom had been weak and foolish, were more inclined to put the blame upon the right shoulders and to say that Mr. Hibble and his particular followers had been wanting in charity and duty, and that it was to a great extent their fault that Tom Rhole had acted as he had done.

“They've just driven th' young felley away,” they said; “an' it's noan to be wondered at that he's dun it. Th' jury quitted him, an' they'd na reet to fling it in his face.”

And it was in that way that Mr. Chepworth, the superintendent of the circuit, took it, and he gave Mr. Hibble and one or two others a very unpleasant half-hour.

“Who are you to judge,” he asked sternly, “when a properly-constituted tribunal acquitted Thomas Rhole? And by what right did you take his name from the plan without consulting me? These things were not for one or two to decide upon, but for the whole church to settle. You have exceeded your duty, Mr. Hibble, and been lacking in Christian kindness. It is your fault that the young man has gone back to his old associations. It is the same spirit which you have shown in regard to the work of Mary Grey, and yet she is doing more good than you and I put together, perhaps.”

It was long since the ruling spirits at the chapel had been so taken to task, and the sensation produced was accordingly great.

But that did not alter the fact. Tom had enlisted, and there was an end of it.

There were red eyes in the Medsters' home when he first came to make the thing known, and for once John Medster seemed very angry.

“Was theer noan lumber enough wi'out this?” he demanded. “Yo' ha' won my lass's heart, an' neow yo' mun go and try to break it. Aw'm capt at yo'. Tom—Aw'm fair capt. Aw thought yo' wor a mon, and could stand a bit o' trubble.”

“An' yo've found Aw'm noan a mon. Aw'm a bad lot; an' th' sewner that Kitty's free o' the' loikes o' me, th' better fo' her.”

"Naa yo' lewk ahere, Tom!" said Mr. Medster sternly. "If yo' means that yo' want to get shut o' Kitty—why, yo' just say so——"

"Aw doan't mean nowt o' th' sort! Aw luv Kitty, an' Aw shall allers luv her; bud Aw'm noan good enough fo' her—an' that's the truth!"

"Yo're a gormed fool—an' that the truth!" replied Mr. Medster, "an' yo've made a foine boggle o' things! Yo're to spend th' best yers o' your life, an' aw fo' wor? When you've served yor toime, an' yo' cum back, wor ha' yo' got to offer to Kitty, if hoo waits fo' yo'? It's a shawme, Tom; an' Aw thought better o' yo'."

And Tom could only look miserable, for he knew that it was the truth, and could not be denied or argued away.

And Kitty herself, when Tom—a very shame-faced Tom—saw her, oh, how she cried!

"Oh, Tom, Aw wor so prewd o' yo', an' Aw didna care wot people said, because Aw knew that yo' wor innocent. An' to think that my Tom went an' got drunk, an' was locked oop! Oh, it's making my hert sad! An' then to 'list! If yo'd coom bac', an' said that yo wor sorry, Aw'd ha' just kissed yo' an' tried to help yo' to do better; an' naa—naa——"

"Naa yo'd best try to forget me, Kitty," he answered.

"Forget yo', Tom!" Kitty looked up into his face. "Yo' knaw Aw conna forget yo'. Aw doan't luv that way. Aw's given yo' aw my hert, an' Aw conna tak' it bac' ageen noways, Tom."

"Well, it's done, Kitty," Tom groaned, "an' theer's na gettin' aat o' it. Aw conna run away an' desert. Aw wodna' do it if Aw could. Aw won't ha' folk thro' that oop in my face."

"No, no; yo' munna dew that, Tom," Kitty agreed. "Aw wodna' ha' yo' do that. Aw mun wait fo' yo', Tom. Aw doan't mind th' waitin', only, Tom, yo' wull ha' to go away, an' wor Aw's goin' to do then? And happen yo' wull ha' to go to war, an' how'll Aw live, thinkin' each day that yo've got hurt?"

It was bad for Tom. All his love for Kitty cried out against his deed; and he did love Kitty—he knew he loved her now, as he had not known it before. She did not scold or rebuke him; she only clung about his neck and sobbed out her grief. Oh, if only he had listened to Mary Grey's advice that night, and have gone to chapel in face of it all, how much happier he would have been now!

And Mary herself seemed quite vexed with him. She did not say much, only that she was disappointed, and that if he had loved Kitty as she had thought he would not have acted so.

"Bud Aw do luv her," he persisted. "Aw knaws that it doan't seem loike it, bud Aw do. Yo' doan't understand, Mary, bud after Aw got my wits, an' Aw knawed wor Aw'd dun, an' how Aw'd been in drink, Aw wor that shawmed that Aw thought Aw could na see her ony moar; an' Aw went straight away an' 'listed, 'cos Aw thought hoo wodna want to ha' anything more to do wi' me."

"And now you know different," Mary answered; and Tom sighed.

"Ay, Mary, an' now Aw knaw different, an' it's a bitter knowledge."

"And what about your poor old mother?" asked Mary. "Did you not think of what your going away would mean to her?"

"Aw didna' think o' nowt bud clearin' off," he answered. "Aw were clean crazed, Aw think. Muther, hoo is fair siked abaat it. Yo' can say wot yo'n a moind to, Mary, an' yo' conna say wur na Aw think o' mysel'. Aw'm a bad lot, an' that's th' end, soide, an' middle o' it. They gi' me th' bullit fro' th' chapel, an' it wor such a clowt o' th' yed fo' me that Aw's hardings knawin' wor Aw've been doin' since."

"Oh, Tom, Tom, if you had only been patient!" she said. "And is it true that you will have to leave here?"

"Ay, it's true enuff, wur luck. Aw th' 'cruits is to be drafted to sum barracks or oather. Bud it's na use sikin' o'er sheeded milk, Mary; an' 'tain't loike yo' to mak' it harder fo' me than theer's need fo'. If yo' want to be my friend, yo' try an' cômfort Kitty, poor lass. Aw's hardly th' hert to see her naa."

"Tom," said Mary gravely, "suppose—only suppose, Tom—that this could be undone?"

"Undone! Wot, me noan 'listed? Na, lass, aw th' 'sposin' in th' world wunna bring that abaat."

"I said 'suppose,' Tom. Now, what would you do? Would you just stay here and face things like a man, and prove by your life that you were worthy of Kitty's trust and love, or would you go breaking out in some fresh way, and doing something stupid? Because if you would do that, Tom, it would only mean causing Kitty more trouble; and she is my friend, and I would not like that. It would be far better for you to go than to do that."

"Aw doan't understand yo', lass. Yo'se noan one to spell bull scatter an' talk nonsense, an' yet Aw conna get at the bottom o' wor yo' mean."

"Never you mind that, Tom," replied Mary. "All you have got to do is to answer my question. I want to know what you would do."

"Sign the pledge right away, fust thing," came the answer. "Aw'll do that anyways. Aw's a fool when Aw's got a soap in me!"

"Very well. That is all right. And next, Tom?"

"Go bac' an' ask Mestur Marshall to tak' me on ageen; an' then wark tin my arms wor welly droppin' off, an' get a whoam fo' Kitty."

"You mean it, Tom—you really mean it?" said Mary; and he replied, with an emphasis which left little room for doubting his sincerity:

"Ay, Aw do mean it. Bud wor's the good?" he added bitterly. "It's cruel, Mary, to talk so, when yo' knaw as well's Aw do that it's na use."

This conversation had taken place outside Tom's own home. Mary had met him as she was returning from a visit to the Institute, and she smiled quite cheerfully as she listened.

"Are you coming on to see Kitty, Tom?" she said, ignoring his last remark.

"Aw doan't knaw, Mary. Aw want to, bud Aw conna bear to see her siking, an' knaw that it's aw my fault. Oh, Mary, Aw's leetsome, Aw's very leetsome, an' it dunna' mak' it na better to knaw that it's aw' my own fault."

Tom's voice had something suspiciously like a sob in it; and Mary laid one little hand upon his arm, as she answered earnestly:

"You come back with me, Tom, and see Kitty. She will be very disappointed if you do not come; and you leave the rest, perhaps it will come right in a way that you do not think of."

"Aw dunna see how it can come reet," he answered. "Aw's 'listed, an' there's an end o' it."

But Tom, despite his doubts and fears, suffered Mary's counsel to prevail, and went with her to the Medsters'. He was so humbled and so contrite that even John Medster had no heart to rebuke him again; while as for Mrs. Medster, she could not have grieved more had Tom been one of her own boys.

"Mary's been talkin' to me, Kitty," said Tom, when he and his sweetheart were alone. "Ah, Kitty, Aw wor a fool noan to listen to her afore. Aw'd noan be in this lumber naa if Aw'd done that."

"Wor's hoo been sayin', Tom?" answered Kitty listlessly. She seemed quite crushed by her sorrow—the big trouble of Tom going right away, and the possible danger of having to fight. It did not matter to Kitty that there was no war—soldiers went to fight, and Tom would have to go. It weighed like a heavy load upon her, and she could not shake it off.

So Tom repeated all Mary's conversation, and Kitty suddenly seemed to grow more cheerful.

"Hoo doan't talk less hoo has some plan," she said. "Hoo's clever. Lewk haa hoo did at th' inquest. Hoo's got sum idea, fo' sartin', Tom, or hoo wod noan ha' spoken loike that to yo'."

But Tom shook his head. He had taken the shilling, he had enlisted; the thing was beyond recall, let Mary be as clever as she might.

But when he had gone, and Kitty and Mary were alone, the mill-girl put her hand on her friend's arm, and she said:

"Mary, tha' hast been a good friend t' me. Aw didna think when Aw axed yo' to come whoam wi' me haa much Aw wod owe to yo'."

"Why, Kitty," laughed Mary, "what have I done now?"

"Yo's done a lot. Didn't yo' get Tom free; an' didna' yo' try to keep him straight? An' naa yo'se got sum plan."

"How do you know that, Kitty?" asked Mary, smiling still more.

"Yo's talked to him. Aw knaw yo' well enuff to knaw yo's got sum plan."

"Well, I will not keep you in suspense, Kitty," came the answer. "I have a plan, and a very simple one. I wanted to be sure that Tom was really sorry; and now that he is, we can put that plan into practice. Did you never hear of a recruit buying his discharge, Kitty?"

"Na," answered Kitty, shaking her head.

"Oh, it is quite common! It costs five pounds."

"Five paands!" repeated Kitty blankly. "Bud wors the brass to cum fro'?"

"I will get it," came the calm answer; and Kitty stared.

"Yo'! Wors yo' goin' to get it? Ha' yo' got ony in th' bank?"

"Just a little. At any rate, I can get that. Now, look here, Kitty, there is only one thing: You are not to tell anyone that I have given it to you. Do you promise that?"

"But wors Aw to say if they ask me haa Aw got it?"

"I do not see that anyone will ask you. If they do, you can say that it was lent to you. Put it that way. I will have the money to-morrow, and I promise you that I will give it to you; and then you can give it to Tom your own self, and tell him to pay it."

"Yo' 'ull gi' it to me to-morrow!" gasped Kitty, almost unable to grasp the meaning of it—it was such unhopèd-for good fortune.

"Yes—in the morning."

"An' Aw—Aw—Mary, Aw conna speak. Aw conna say wor Aw want to. Aw think my hert's choked oop wi' words, an' they wull na come to my lips. Aw—Aw doan't knaw wor to say, Mary!"

"Then say nothing," answered Mary gently. "And remember that it is only just giving back a little of the kindness which you showed to the friendless girl who came here looking for work."

"Five paands! Five paands! Aw'll ha' five paands in th' mornin'!" The joyful thought kept running through Kitty's head that night. But little did she or Mary Grey foresee what the giving and receiving of that five pounds was going to entail; for neither of them knew of the horrible suspicions which had been planted in Marshall Berrimeed's heart through the hint dropped by Sir Digby Rulph.

CHAPTER 10.

A White Lie.

MR. DWITE was in a bad temper; he was illustrating the truth of the adage that the more a man has the more he wants. Work was going on as fast as hand and machinery could drive it, and he was not satisfied. He had more orders than he could turn out in the time he had allowed, hence he fussed and grumbled until he was, in the words of the clerks in the office, "Like a bear with a sore head!"

The ominous news spread through the mill, and, as a consequence, everybody avoided the manager's office as much as possible, seeing that when he was bad-tempered Mr. Dwite was prone to relieve his feelings at the expense of the first unfortunate who came in his way.

"Leave 'un alone tin he gets ower it, an' pike forrat wi' th' wark," was the general advice under the circumstances, with the result that if there arose an absolute need for consulting the manager, everyone was on the look-out for someone else to do it.

And such a need arose in the room where the slubbing machines were working, much to the consternation of its foreman, who had already tasted a sample of Mr. Dwite's ill-temper.

"Confaand it, it's just my luck!" the man growled ruefully. "It's awkkerd. Aw'll nor goo. He's bound to bras aat at me, an' then happen Aw'd caw him, an' Aw'd get th' bullit. Aw'll send Mary Grey. Hoo's th' copp'st hand at manidgin' grumpy folk in th' place. Mary, lass, Aw want thy," he added, coming to the girl's side. "Coom here a minit!"

"Naa yo' go daan to Mestur Dwite," he went on, when Mary, having stopped her machine, followed him to the end of the room. "Yo' go daan to Mestur Dwite an' tell him fro' me that we conna get that last lot o' bobbins run off fur him to-day if we'se to dew th' oathers fust. He's shapin' loike a flea in a glue-pot ta-day, an' Aw doan't want to ha' moar to dew wi' him than Aw con help," he added candidly. "Tha const talk to him th' best o' ony."

Mary smiled and obeyed. She had not the slightest fear of Mr. Dwite's ill-temper. Indeed, the manager, the few times he had to see her, had spoken quite civilly. He had never quite got over her being taken on by Marshall Berrimeed; but he knew when a minder worked well, and he knew that the London girl was a power for good in the place.

She knocked at the door, and was bidden to enter; and Mr. Dwite, very red-faced, looked up from his desk, his hair ruffled, his pen behind his ear, and demanded of her what she wanted.

"Why didn't the fool come down and see me himself?" he shouted, when the message was given. "Is he such an ass that he is obliged to send a girl down with his messages? He has got to get the work done, and that is all about it!"

And he pushed his writing-pad as he spoke so violently that he sent an ink-bottle to the floor, to fall into a large basket of freshly-spun cops.

"Confound it!" he cried, jumping up hastily. "Here, lass, pick 'em out quick! Put 'em into that empty basket yonder. I will see your foreman."

And he strode off, leaving Mary engaged in hastily rescuing the cops from damage.

She had just finished the task when Mr. Dwite returned, looking more red than ever.

"Many damaged?" he asked shortly; and she shook her head.

"Only about a couple of dozen, sir," she answered.

"That's lucky. You can go. I have seen the foreman myself."

Evidently he had—and had also relieved his mind, judging by the angry

expression upon the man's face when Mary got back to her own room. But, whatever had passed, it made no difference to the work. It rattled on as fast as it could go until the signal for the dinner-hour sounded.

The girls had arranged not to go home. Knowing how busy they were likely to be, they had brought some lunch with them, so that they could get their machines cleaned and be ready to start again the very moment that meal-time was over.

And Mary, brushing the fluff from hair and clothes, slipped off her apron, took hat and jacket from a little handbag which she had brought with her, and, telling Kitty that she would not be long, she started off to the town, to come back in less than half an hour and place five golden sovereigns in her companion's hand.

"There, Kitty! Now, to-night you can give them to Tom, and then, instead of having to go away, he can get his discharge and try again. And I hope, dear, that they will bring happiness both to you and to him."

And Kitty could only press her friend's hand and murmur her broken thanks as she looked at those precious coins that meant so much to her.

"Oh, Mary, Aw conna say much; bud Aw'll never forget, an' Aw'll do onything fur yo', Aw will!"

The whistle sounded, and they went back to their tasks; but Kitty could not refrain from looking at those beautiful new sovereigns once or twice, with the certain result that she was seen by others, who at once questioned her.

"Hallo, Kitty! Ha' yo' been drawin' tha brass fo' th' wakes?" she was asked. "Wheer did yo' ger five paands fro'?"

"Had it left to me," was the reply. "Yo' moind your own business."

"Happen Aw may want to borra a paand or two, lass."

"Happen that tha wonna ger't!"

"Naa, yo' girls, pike forrad!" said the foreman. "And doan't stan' chat-t'r'in' theer loike a lot o' pynots!"

"Doan't yo' talk to Kitty so, 'sif hoo wur noabry," came the laughing retort. "Hoo's got five paands in her pocket, an' that's moar than yo' can say."

"Yo' get on, yo' young powsement!" retorted the foreman, "an' doan't come noan o' thy blatherin', or happen yo'll foind Aw's got summat on th' stick fo' yo', an' it wunna be five paands!"

"Don't take the money out here, Kitty," whispered Mary, taking advantage of the rattling machinery to utter her warning. "I did not want anyone to know that you had it. Now they will be sure to ask questions."

"They may ask, bud that isna sayin' they's goin' to be answered," laughed Kitty happily; but she put the money away, and turned her attention to her work.

And the bobbins turned and the flyers whirled, and the rattle of the machinery filled the room, thick with the smell of oil and cotton.

And presently Mr. Dwite entered, a dark frown on his face, and spoke in low tones to the foreman.

Many a covert glance was cast in their direction, for the entrance of the manager might mean trouble for someone, and it was noticed that once or twice the pair looked in the direction of Kitty Medster.

The foreman nodded his head in assent to some instruction, which was emphasised by an impressive finger laid upon his shoulder. The manager went out, and then the foreman came to Kitty.

"Tha' art to go daan to Mestur Dwite's office, lass," he said; and Kitty stared.

"Wat—me? Wot's th' matter naa?"

"Aw conna tell thee if tha dunna knaw," was the reply. "Yo' go to Mestur Dwite; he'll tell yo'."

So Kitty, feeling somewhat ill at ease, went down, and stood in the manager's presence, and Mr. Dwite glanced up sternly.

"Dew yo' want me, sir?" she asked.

"Yes. I want to ask you a question, and I want a straight answer. You have five pounds about you?"

Five pounds! How did he know that, and what was it to do with him? Kitty, in spite of herself, felt strangely nervous at that blunt question.

"Well?" demanded Mr. Dwite sharply.

"Aw's got five pounds, reet enuff!" she confessed; and the manager nodded.

"And where did you get it from?" was the next question; and Kitty was cornered. She had promised Mary that she would not say who had given it to her. Kitty was loyal through and through; let what would come of it, she would not break the promise she had given to her friend.

"Where did you get it from?" came the question again.

"Aw had it give to me, sir!" faltered Kitty.

"Given to you! Five pounds given to you! Who gave it to you?"

And Kitty could not tell him that. She had to stammer that she had promised that she would not tell who gave it to her; and Mr. Dwite frowned still more.

"Now, look here, girl," he said. "There were five pounds—five sovereigns—on that desk this morning, and they are gone! They have been stolen by someone, and you have been seen with five pounds."

Stolen! Kitty looked at the stern face with dazed eyes. Stolen! Surely Mary had not stolen those five sovereigns! No; she felt indignant at the very idea of it. And yet Mary had been down alone in the office, for she had told her so.

What was she to do? The stern, grey eyes never relaxed their keen glance upon her face. She could not betray Mary! If Mary had stolen them, she would—what? Give them back, surely. Never take stolen money! But Mary had not stolen them; she was sure of that.

"Well, what have you to say, girl?" asked the manager. "You must tell me who gave you that money, or I shall think that you took it."

"Wot? Yo' think Aw's a thief?" cried Kitty, her eyes full of anger. "Aw's been heer a few years naa, Mestur Dwite, an' noabry's yet had a word to say ageean me!"

"Very true! And I do not want to say a word against you now. I only ask you to tell who gave you the five pounds."

"Aw conna."

"Well, perhaps I can tell you. Was it your friend Mary Grey? She was alone in this office some time this morning. I know the money was safe when she was here, but I cannot remember seeing it afterwards."

He suspected Mary. Oh, what was she to do? How could she answer his question? Suppose—only suppose—that Mary had done this—done it for her sake?

The manager waited a moment; then he said abruptly:

"Go and tell Mary Grey to come here! You can come back with her."

Kitty went, scared and troubled; and just then Marshall Berrimeed entered the office, and asked, in his pleasant way, what was wrong. But when he heard—when Mr. Dwite said plainly that he thought Mary Grey must have taken the money—how the memory of Sir Digby's words rushed to his mind!

Could they be true? Was it possible that the very first opportunity which had presented itself she had taken advantage of? If—if it were so,

if she confessed, even he might not be able to screen her from the consequences. There was one way—only one—and he seized it at once.

"My dear Dwite," he said, "it is entirely my fault. I am sorry that you spoke as you did to the girl. I came in, and saw the money lying there, and I put it into my pocket. I don't like gold left about, for fear it may prove a temptation to any of the hands. I took it, and here it is."

"Great Scott! And I told that girl that her friend must have taken it! She is coming down now! I just reckon that you have got me into a nice mess, Mr. Marshall! I shall have them crying and protesting, and the hands will be up in arms! They are always ready to do that if they think that any of their number have been wronged in any way. Here they are!"

"You had better let me explain, Dwite," Marshall Berrimeed said; and at that moment the two girls came in, Kitty white and tearful, Mary Grey calm, with a look of indignant scorn upon her face.

"You want me, sir?" she said; and there was not the slightest tremor in her even tones. Marshall, watching her, thought what a consummate actress she must be.

"I? No; it's all right, my girl——" began the manager; but she shook her head.

"That can scarcely be, sir. Kitty tells me that you accuse me of having stolen five pounds."

"It is a mistake," put in Marshall—"a natural one. I took the five pounds up for safety's sake, and forgot to tell Mr. Dwite. He missed the money, and, hearing that you had given your friend such a sum, he had to make inquiries. That was only his duty."

"There is no question of my honesty, sir?" the girl asked; and he looked her full in the face.

"There should be no need for that question," he answered significantly. "I have told you that I took the money, and I have returned it to Mr. Dwite. You can both go."

"It's a good job that you came in, Mr. Marshall," said Mr. Dwite. "I might have sent for a constable, and then there would have been a nice business!"

And Marshall Berrimeed repeated the words to himself:

"It is a good job that I came in."

CHAPTER 11.

As Proud as a Queen.

"IT'S come at last! Aw's got to go away!"

That was the announcement which Tom Rhole made when he entered the Medsters' kitchen that same evening.

Poor Tom had been hoping in some vague way that Mary might help him, though how she could manage it he did not know. But now hope was a thing of the past; he had received orders to hold himself in readiness to move with the other recruits southward.

It had been hard work for Tom ever since he enlisted. He had been taken to the barracks, and each day had been employed in drill, drill, from morning to night, while the older and more experienced men looked upon the new recruits as lawful victims on whom to play all manner of jokes.

Had Tom joined as many of the others had done he might not have minded that, but he was so miserable that he had no spirit to enter into the rough fun, and it took him all his time to keep his temper and not be led into a stand-up fight.

And now he was to go away—to leave Kitty and his old mother. He was

out on leave, and this was the message he had to bring. What wonder that he looked a very woebegone Tom as he stood in that bright little room looking at the faces of his friends, and, most of all, at Kitty's!

But what was this? He had expected a burst of tears, and Kitty was smiling! Surely it could not be that she was glad he was going? It was one thing to tell Kitty that she would be well quit of him, it would be quite another thing if she took him at his word.

"Aw said that Aw wor goin'!" he repeated. "Yo' ain't glad, Kitty, aw yo'?"

And then Kitty jumped up and threw her arms round his neck, and in her joy she did the one thing which she had promised not to do—told the source from which the money had come.

"Oh, Tom, didna Aw say that Mary wod find a way to help us?" she cried. "Didna Aw say so? An' hoo has dun it, Tom? Lewk heer!" And she pulled out the five sovereigns. "Lewk! That's fo' your discharge. It'll cost five paands, an' heer they are. Yo've just got to go an' get your discharge, Tom!"

John Medster looked across at Mary. His wife ran to clasp her in her arms, while the children stared, and Mary, who had been nursing little Kit, looked up and said:

"Oh, Kitty, Kitty, I thought you were not to say where it came from!"

"Oh"—Kitty looked black—"Aw clean forgot! Aw wor that happy, Aw clean forgot! Dunna be angry, Mary. It wor too big a sacret to keep long; an' wot's it matter if any folks knaw how good yo've been?"

"Mary"—Tom crossed the room and took her hand—"Mary, is this thy doing? Aw dunna knaw how to thank yo'; but if Aw tak' this brass, Aw'se just goin' to wark, an' wark, an' pay it back."

"Mary," said John Medster, in his turn, "when aar Kitty fust brought yo' heer, Aw thought as how hoo wor doin' a kindly deed to summun in trubble; bud Aw'se beginnin' to think that hoo brought a angel awhoam wi' her."

And Mary had to take all their praise and words of rough but heartfelt thanks, and, added to them, the tearful rejoicing of Tom's old mother. And what could she do but smile, and try to hide the fact that her own eyes were filled with tears as she saw their relief?

"We munna tak' they brass fo' lung, lass," John Medster declared. "Na, na, that wod be a shame fo' sewer. We'll just say tha' hast lent it to us; bud we'll pay it back to yo' ageean."

"That shall be just as you like," she answered. "I shall not ask for it till you offer it. But now let Tom go and tell the officers, and ask for the forms to fill up; and then he had better see about getting work again."

What a walk that was for Kitty! How she hung on Tom's arm, and waited about while he was in the barracks! And how she smiled when he came out, and told her that in a few days he would be free! It was a time to be remembered; a time so full of happiness that she did not know how to contain herself. Tom was not going away; Tom was going to stay; and it was all Mary's doing!

And this important business settled, the next step was for Tom to go to the mill and see Mr. Marshall, and tell him that he was very much ashamed of himself, and that if he might have another chance he would work his hardest to show his repentance was real.

"Aw wunna moind abaat them sayin' Aw knaws summat of Marg'ret's death, sir," he said. "That's wot razzled me afoor. Aw wunno moind it ageean, if yo' wull gi' me a job, sir!"

"I will give you a job with pleasure, Rhole," replied Marshall Berri-meed, "for there is not a smarter hand in the mill. But how are you

managing about the discharge? It costs five pounds, does it not? Have you as much money as that—or do you want assistance?"

"Noa, sir; Aw'se geet th' brass. It's Mary Grey whoa's bottomed this lumber fo' me, hoo gave th' brass to Kitty, for her t' gi' to me."

"Mary Grey gave Kitty the five pounds, did she?" said Marshall Berrimeed slowly. So that was why she had taken it. She wanted to help her friend.

That she had taken it, Marshall could not but believe. The thought had been hateful to him, but he could not put it aside. He had been more than tempted to give her notice, but he could not bring himself to do it: even this revelation, as he considered it, of the girl's moral weakness, could not kill that love which had grown in his heart, though it could torture it. But now that this light was thrown upon the business, he felt more gentle towards the culprit. It was not that she had stolen for herself, but to help her friend. Marshall Berrimeed felt thankful to know that.

Still, the theft was there, and could not be got over. It revealed a terrible moral failing. He would speak to the girl—he could now that he knew she had done this thing for Kitty Medster's sake. He could speak gently and kindly, pointing out the wrong, and warning her against its repetition. Altogether, Marshall Berrimeed felt glad at heart that he had this explanation; and he dismissed Tom with the assurance that as soon as he was free a place would be ready for him.

And there was more rejoicing at the Medsters' when that was known; and, of course, Mary was looked upon as being at the bottom of it all. She was just an angel, and they would have liked to see anyone deny that.

But Mary was a bit puzzled. During the few days which had elapsed since Mr. Dwite had accused her of taking that money, she had noticed a decided change in the demeanour of her master—for so all the hands regarded Marshall. Before he would smile, and give her a kindly word if he passed her; but now he went by, cold and stern; and if he looked at her at all, it was with a glance of reproof. Mary Grey was puzzled about that, for she could think of no reason for the change.

But she was soon to learn. On the very Saturday after Tom's discharge came, she took little Kit for a ramble over the moor. Saturday was the free day—she always enjoyed a ramble then; and the institute, which was growing at a remarkable rate, did not call for her attendance until the evening.

So, with the little fellow toddling along beside her, she had made her way out towards Old Gabbly End, going almost past the cottage wherein Margaret Hall had lived. It was empty now. People were shy of taking it, after the grim tragedy which had been enacted within its walls.

And there, seated on the grass, she watched the little fellow play; and there Marshall Berrimeed, coming across the moor, found her; and as he looked he thought what a fair picture the girl made, and his heart revolted against the idea that her life was stained with dishonesty.

She looked up as he approached, and a deeper blush mantled her cheeks. She would have risen, but he said hastily:

"Do not disturb yourself. I am glad that I have met you. I wished to speak with you alone?"

He wished to speak to her. And yet he found it very difficult, now that the opportunity had occurred; and she, despite his words, rose and stood there, her hands behind her back, looking calmly and steadfastly at him. She was no longer the workgirl; she looked a graceful, beautiful woman.

"You wished to speak to me?" she repeated. And the tone seemed to ask what possible communication he, the master of Berrimeed, could have to make to her, a mere minder.

"Yes; I see you have that poor little child. I heard from John Medster that you have constituted yourself his protector."

"I pay the Medsters a small sum for his keep. It is but a trifle," she replied. And her tones were cool, as though she were surprised and somewhat offended that he should mention a matter which plainly was no concern of his.

"Yet it is kind of you," he replied gravely. "You do not earn so much. And, as you told me yourself, you are alone, with your own battle to fight."

"Perhaps that is the very reason why I want to help someone even more lonely and helpless than myself."

He nodded. He was bewildered. This girl could be no thief; and yet—The suspense was too great; he must know the truth, one way or the other.

"I understand, also, that it is due to you that Tom Rhole was able to get his discharge?"

Surely her manner changed. She looked troubled, but she made no answer.

"Mary," he said—and he fancied that she started and drew herself up as she heard him use that Christian name—"I want to ask you one question. Do you think it right to commit a wrong action to help your friends?"

"I hardly understand you, sir," she replied. And he hesitated. He could not put the accusation in all its brutal plainness. "Please explain," she said again; and still the words did not come. She regarded him composedly; there was almost something of a challenge in her air. "If we were speaking upon equal terms," she said, "I should say that there was something more implied in that question than the words convey. I think that I have a right to ask you to explain it, sir."

"Very well. I will put it another way. Do you think it right to take money that did not belong to you to procure Thomas Rhole's discharge?"

"Sir!"

Only that one word. She was facing him, her face full of indignant light. Either she was a splendid actress, or she was entirely innocent.

"Do you understand me?" he said again, after a pause. "Cannot you answer the question?"

"It should not want answering," she replied proudly. "The answer is obvious. What is not so plain is the reason why you ask it. Mr. Dwite said that I took that money; you owned that you had taken it."

"And you—did you think that I was speaking the truth?" he queried.

"Why should I not think so? What interest had you to do otherwise?"

"A foolish interest, perhaps—that of shielding you from the consequences of your act. I did not find that money. The coins I handed to Mr. Dwite were my own."

"And you think—you mean to say—that I—I took that money and gave it to Kitty? You accuse me?" she almost panted.

"No; I do not want to accuse you—I do not want to pain you. I only want to tell you that if you had needed help, and had come to me, I would have been glad to aid you."

"But I did not want help; and if I had I could not come to you. What reason should I have for doing so? It is more an insult to suggest that than to say that I am a thief."

"I mean no insult——" he began. But she interrupted him.

"What is it but an insult? If you had thought me guilty, you should have spoken, and given me opportunity to clear my character. I refuse to be sheltered in such a way. There can be no reason, Mr. Berrimeed, why you should interest yourself in me more than in any other mill-hand. If you mean to make such an accusation, please do so in plain language, and not ambiguously—then I can meet it and refute it. Do you make such a charge?"

"No," he began; I——"

"I do not want to discuss the matter, then," she retorted. "I may be but a poor London girl, but we are not used to such innuendoes there. If you are dissatisfied, I can leave the mill at once!"

"But, Mary——" he protested. And she interrupted him with the gesture of an angry queen.

"Mr. Berrimeed, we are not at work now. At the mill it may be customary to address girls by their Christian names. At the present moment I am my own mistress, and my name is Miss Grey. If you mean to prefer this charge, I shall be glad to meet it; if you do not, there can be nothing else to converse about. Good-afternoon."

She stooped and picked up little Kit, and walked off, erect and indignant; and he, standing there, looked after her in amazement. Mary Grey had spoken to him, she, the poor mill-hand, as though she were his equal, or his superior, in the social scale!

CHAPTER 12.

Mr. Berrimeed Speaks.

HAD he wronged her? Was it all some hideous mistake? He had intended only to speak kindly, and he had bungled. The very method which he had used had been worse than a plain, outspoken charge; it had been, as she had justly said, a veiled innuendo. A plain charge could have been answered, but such a half-hearted suggestion offered no scope for combating.

Marshall Berrimeed stood there on the moor, pondering, long after Mary Grey had gone. How indignant she had looked! What scorn there had been in her look and tone; and how she had rejected the hint at friendship and help!

Why? He shuddered at himself as he reflected; for one in his position to speak in such half-hearted fashion to a worker such as Mary Grey, a young and beautiful woman, made it impossible for her to place anything but a false construction upon his words. It should either have been the plain truth, that he loved her, or nothing at all.

And how she had repulsed him! How indignantly she had checked him when he used her Christian name! How she had challenged him to make a plain accusation, and let her meet it! Marshall Berrimeed felt a contempt for himself. He told himself that he had behaved like a coward towards the friendless girl, and in the midst of his reflections there came back, with all their horrible subtleness, the hints thrown out by Sir Digby Rulph.

A girl such as Sir Digby had described would be likely to carry a thing off in that fashion. But her language, well chosen and educated, her rejection of his proffered friendship! Surely, had she been such a one as Sir Digby pictured, she would have accepted that, and have sought to turn it to her own advantage.

And then her work at the institute! Would any girl, a thief and liar—for if she were not innocent, then she could only be called that—behave in such a way?

"A fountain cannot send forth sweet water and bitter," the apostle had said, and could a girl, herself a mere swindler, spend her time in leading the wild, careless girls from the mill into better and nobler paths?

Marshall Berrimeed turned away with the uncomfortable feeling that he had outraged Mary's feelings beyond the hope of forgiveness, and had made an awful mistake. It would have been wiser to have spoken plainly, and to have invited her to furnish proofs of her innocence; that would have

ended the matter one way or the other. But now the doubt must still exist; and she, knowing what he thought, and not having the opportunity of defending herself, would probably go away. That might be the best ending to it—the best for her, the best for him; but it would be his injustice that had driven her out, and it would make no difference. The love was there, and the love must remain there for all time.

So, moody, distressed, ill at ease, Marshall Berrimeed walked slowly back in the direction of his home, and on the way he met the man who had first brought the charge against Mary—Mr. Dwite himself.

"Afternoon, Mr. Marshall," said the manager. "I am glad to have run against you. I was going up to the house. Do you know if the master is in?"

"I believe that he is, Dwite. When I came out he was going to play bowls with Sir Digby Rulph, and I know that if they start on that they will keep it up till dusk. But why do you ask? Is anything wrong?"

"Not a bit of it, Mr. Marshall," was the reply of Mr. Dwite. "Only I met Smith, of Holder and Smith's, just now, and he has made me an offer, a good one, too. There is an American firm trying to corner their supply of cotton; but Smith is nothing if he is not patriotic, and he is at logger-heads with his partner over it. It means a lumping big cheque, but it means getting good cotton at a low figure. He will keep the offer open until midday Monday, and I wanted to see both you and your father, so that you may have time to talk it over. I should not have thought of worrying you on Saturday afternoon otherwise."

"Well, you need not apologise for that, Dwite," was the answer. "I do not think that ever owners had a more energetic manager than we have in you; you seem positively to live for the mill."

"Oh, I try to do my best, Mr. Marshall!" was the gratified reply. "I like it, you know. I've practically lived in the mill the best part of my life; went there as a boy, in your grandfather's time. And I delight in getting a rise, if it can be done honestly, out of other firms. It's my pleasure."

"A profitable one for us," laughed Marshall; and they walked on together, the manager turning the conversation suddenly by saying:

"By the way, I met that London girl just now. I don't think that she has quite got over the business about that gold, for she gave me such a look. Queer wench she is; not a bit like our girls. In the mill she is as quiet and respectful as the best of them; but outside—well, it is Jack is as good as his master."

"Is that not a characteristic of all our workers, Dwite? I have generally found it so."

"Quite right—quite right. A Lancashire worker, out of work hours, don't trouble much about his employers, I'll allow; but this lass is different. It is not only that out of work hours she is her own mistress, but, hang it, she seems to give one the impression that she is as good as they are, and a long way better. She is the queerest wench that ever I set eyes on. But," he added, "she works well, and, what is more, she seems to make the others work well."

"Yes," assented Marshall absently; and Mr. Dwite went on, taking no notice of the troubled expression upon his companion's face:

"Do you know, only last Saturday I peeped, just out of curiosity, into that place of theirs—their institute, as they call it. My word, it was a revelation! All the girls as neat as pins, and sitting there like ladies of the land, and the London girl playing at the piano for one of them to sing. And then she played the violin. She can play well, too, I will allow. And she got that wench of Medster's—and the girl was getting as wild as her sister went—to stand up and recite. It's a big lot better than having them

run wild. It stuck in my throat when I thought she had taken the money, and I am free to say that I was glad to find she hadn't touched it."

She had not touched it! Was that true or false? In his heart he knew. He felt inclined to take Mr. Dwite into his confidence, and tell him the truth; but he checked the desire, little thinking that within a very short time the manager would know the facts, and he himself would be in a rather awkward position.

Yet so it fell out, for when they reached home and had consulted with Samuel Berrimeed, and settled the dry business details, the mill-owner turned to his manager and said, while his fingers fumbled in his waistcoat pocket:

"By the way, Dwite, I am going to blow you up."

"Eh!"

The manager stared incredulously, so that the mill-owner had to burst into a hearty laugh and clap him on the shoulder.

"Don't look like that, man!" he cried. "It's nothing very serious. I looked into your office on—let me see, it was Monday or Tuesday, I forget which—and I saw five sovereigns on your desk."

"Yes," said Mr. Dwite, still perplexed, while Marshall felt his cheeks flush.

"Well," said the mill-owner, "I don't like having money left around; it might lead some poor hand into temptation, you know." Precisely what Marshall had said. "So," continued the old gentleman, "I just slipped it into my pocket, and I have forgotten it until this afternoon. Didn't you miss it, Dwite? I don't think you are as careless as that."

"Of course I missed it," stammered Mr. Dwite.

"But you didn't make it up out of your own pocket, surely, without inquiry? That won't do. If a loss occurs it must be inquired into, you know, for everyone's sake."

"I——" Mr. Dwite stammered, and rubbed his head. "I don't quite understand. I missed the money and I accused one of the girls."

"Dear, dear, I am sorry!" cried Samuel Berrimeed.

"Oh, there's no harm done! She was soon cleared."

"Indeed! How did that come about?"

"Perhaps I had better explain, father," said Marshall quietly. "It was my doing."

"And what you wanted to do it for gets over me," muttered Mr. Dwite; but Marshall paid no heed to the words.

"I happened to enter," he said to his father, "just after Dwite here had sent for the girl whom he suspected, and—well, I felt sorry for her. I thought, perhaps, that the sight of the gold had been too great a temptation, and so I put Dwite off—told him that I had done what you did, in fact, and handed him the money."

"That was wrong," was the father's reply—"very wrong, Marshall. It was encouraging theft. It is not like you."

"I had my reason for it, sir. I thought that the girl would know that I was aware of her wrong-doing, and that I should be able to speak to her quietly, and warn her."

"Well, and did you?" demanded the mill-owner, while something like a grin stole over the manager's face as he pictured the indignant reply which he made sure Mary Grey would have given.

"I did," replied Marshall. "And I found that I had made a mistake. That is the whole business."

"And who was the girl?" asked Samuel Berrimeed; and Mr. Dwite laughed aloud.

"His pet lamb—the London girl. The one he took on after I told her

that I wouldn't have her. Not but what he was a good judge, for she works well."

Samuel Berrimeed nodded. Marshall saw that his father was secretly displeased; and shortly afterwards Mr. Dwite took his departure.

"Marshall, I want to speak to you for a moment."

Samuel Berrimeed spoke very quietly, and his son turned as he was leaving the room, and returned.

"Certainly, sir; I am quite at your leisure."

"Marshall, you are a man, and I have always considered you an honourable and sensible one. It is more than likely that I am wronging you by speaking as I do now; but, I tell you plainly, I do not like this business about that money. I heard of your engaging that girl, and I know, of course, that she is very attractive-looking; but it was hardly the thing for you yourself to show her how to work that machine—the foreman or one of the hands could have done it. I cannot help thinking that had this been one of the other girls you would not have been so ready to tell a lie—for it was a lie—and to find five pounds to screen a thief—for so you thought her. I fear this girl is either above her station or else there is something wrong. At any rate, I do not like the idea of your making a protegee of her. A master cannot do that with any of his hands with safety. Marshall, I trust that you will remember that you are my son and my partner; the less you have to do with the girls the better. Leave our manager and the foremen to do that."

It was said very quietly, but there could be no mistaking the words. Samuel Berrimeed was shrewd and penetrating. The action of his son was so extraordinary and unlike Marshall that it, in itself, warned him; hence he spoke as he did; and Marshall knew that his father would never, under any circumstances, listen to Mary Grey becoming his wife.

He might even then have told him the truth, have confessed his love. But what was the use? Mary Grey was innocent, and he had insulted her—had accused her of being a thief. It was an indignity no woman could overlook. Had his father consented there and then to their engagement, it would have made no difference—Mary Grey, the lass from London, would not listen to him.

He felt instinctively that, even if this trouble had not existed, she would have been difficult to win. She was proud. The king might woo the beggar maiden, but the beggar maiden would not listen to the king.

He went out, undecided, troubled, relieved, in one way, to know of her innocence, angry with himself that he could ever have doubted her, but troubled—so troubled. And Olive met him, and seeing his look, asked him the cause.

He told her—told her the whole story—ending by asking her what he ought to do; and she answered thoughtfully:

"The easiest way is to leave it alone. It may seem the hardest, but it will be the easiest in the end."

"But do you think it is the right way?" he asked; and she had to shake her head.

"No. I think that an apology ought to be offered; only it is, as father said, difficult for a master to apologise to a mill-hand."

"Not for a gentleman to apologise to a lady, Olive."

"Marshall," she said earnestly, "it is danger, great danger for you. I advise you, do not go. If you do, more may be said than you look for. I earnestly advise you to take no further steps. Even if this girl leaves here, angry because she has been wrongly accused, that is better than—than what may come after. Think of father and mother, Marshall, and let the matter rest where it is."

CHAPTER 13.

Against all Advice.

LIVE warned him to leave things as they were.

There was wisdom in it, that he knew well; but the fact that it was expedient was weighed against the thought that every dictate of chivalry and honour demanded that he should see Mary Grey, tell her that the clear proof of her innocence—an innocence which ought never to have been questioned—was forthcoming, and humbly beg her pardon for the wrong which he had done to her by his unjust thoughts, even though he had been trying to shield her.

If he had only left it at paying the money, it would have been all well—that could not have offended her; it was that unfortunate speech of his, kindly meant as it was.

Marshall Berrimeed was gloomy and ill at ease all that evening. Not for many a day—nay, not on one single occasion in all his life could he remember feeling so torn and divided in mind. Wisdom warned, but inclination pleaded. Reason said leave a little evil rather than create a big one. Honour demanded that the wrong should be righted, let what would follow; and inclination sided with honour in this case.

He argued with himself that it was his plain duty; and he told himself that, since his love was utterly hopeless, he surely was strong and self-controlled enough to apologise to Mary Grey without betraying his secret.

“He who hesitates is lost,” the proverb says. Marshall hesitated, he put wisdom into the background, and he also was lost. He determined that he would see Mary Grey. He might be nothing to her, but she should not remain with hard thoughts, with the sense of having been wronged. He would see Mary Grey.

But how and where, without attracting attention?—and for her sake he must not do that. Rumour’s tongues were easily started, and once set going there was no power to silence them again. If he were seen alone with Mary Grey, those tongues would wag indeed.

Besides, if he asked her to make an appointment with him, he was certain that she would refuse his request.

Three ways presented themselves to him. First, he would call her down into the office. That was dismissed at once. There would be the position of employer and employee then. He could call at the institute. She would be certain to be there in the evening. But, then, would not that set the girls talking? He must see her in private, if she would grant him an interview.

The third way was to go to the Medsters, and see her there; and on the whole that seemed the best, the wisest course to adopt. Marshall, once his mind was made up, was quick to act. He went out, and wended his way towards the Medsters’ home, thinking, as he walked, of the first time that he had gone there, and reflecting upon the strange fortune which brought him on the scene on the afternoon when Mary Grey first applied at the mill for work. Ten minutes later and he would never have seen her, and things might have been different then. It was strange, strange. All these years, and no woman had possessed the power to quicken his pulse one heart’s beat; then a look into one fair face, the glance of a bright eye, and all life’s way seemed altered—altered for good—never to resume its former course.

Mary Grey was dressed ready to start for her institute, when Marshall Berrimeed’s knock sounded at the Medsters’ door.

“Hey—who’s that?” exclaimed John Medster.

While Bess, peeping through the window, cried

“It’s Mestur Marshall, feyther.”

"Mestur Marshall! Wor's he want?" thought John, opening the door.

"Good-evening, Medster! I suppose that I am an unlooked-for visitor."

"That's noan to say tha's unwelcome, sir," replied John. "Come in, if yo' please—in aheer." And John opened the door leading into the little best-room—the room in which Marshall had seen Mary Grey before.

"I want to see Mary Grey for a few minutes, if she is in, and will favour me with an interview," explained Marshall. And John Medster seemed taken aback. The idea of Mr. Marshall Berrimeed talking about a mill-lass favouring him with an interview! Perhaps Marshall himself was aware of the incongruity of his speech, for he added quickly: "If you will tell her that I want to see her, please."

"Surely! Her's gettin' ready to go to th' institute."

"I shall not keep her but a few minutes."

"Aw'll tell her, sir. She'll be heer in a minit."

Mr. Marshall there, and wanting to see her! A bright spot sprang to Mary's cheeks and a glitter to her eyes when the message was given, and for a moment there was the inclination to refuse. But she remembered she was the work-girl, he was the employer, and it might be something about work, or he might be going to press his charge, and give her the opportunity to defend it.

He was standing by the window when she entered, and he turned and glanced at her. He saw the proud poise, the head held erect. In spite of the attempt to appear in her guise of mill-hand, resentment was there, and before he could speak she said:

"I am glad that you have come, sir. Now I can show you this. I wired for it, and it has just come. I think it will explain to you where I got the five pounds from."

He took the object she held out to him—a flimsy telegram—and he read the message:

"Messrs. Dean & Dale beg to state that they were authorised by Lady Mary Stanton to forward the sum of five pounds to Miss Mary Grey on Monday last."

He folded the paper and handed it back to her, she watching him calmly.

"I thought it would make things clear to get that," she said.

"Thank you. There would have been no need for it, however."

"No need! With a charge like that overhanging me! But," she added, as if anxious to change the subject, "you wish to see me, sir?"

Oh, how maddening it was to see her adopt that attitude! She, a work-girl, before him! She was fit to be a queen! She stood there, calmly awaiting his pleasure, as if, beyond a question of business, his presence was a matter of entire indifference to her.

"It was concerning this very matter I called," he said; and she glanced at him sharply. Perhaps he had come to discharge her. No, that could not be it; that would be done at the mill, if anywhere. "I have come," he went on, looking steadily at her, and speaking with grave earnestness, "to humbly beg your pardon for the insult which I offered to you."

Something like a surprise shone in her eyes. He thought they lost their antagonistic expression. But she said nothing, waiting only for him to finish.

"There was no need for me to have seen that telegram. I knew this afternoon, shortly after I had seen you, that a mistake had been made, and that an injustice had been done. I come to tell you so, and to ask your pardon. It was my own father who took the money. He did, in fact, what I said I had done. There is not the slightest shadow of suspicion that can possibly rest upon you now, even without this." And he touched the telegram as he spoke.

"Please do not speak of it any more. I am obliged to you for coming. After all, I suppose that it was a likely thing to suspect me. The money was missing, and it was known that I had exactly that amount in gold. I am glad that it is found. I suppose that I may keep my place at the mill?"

"You have not given me your forgiveness yet," he said.

And she answered gravely:

"Surely there can be no question of pardon between a mill-girl and Mr. Marshall Berrimeed! You have kindly come and told me that I am cleared. That in itself is an act of condescension. Surely it settles everything. The mill-girl should be obliged, not talk of forgiving you."

"You are still resentful; it is natural," he answered. "If there is no room for speaking of a mill-hand forgiving the employer—but as we are not in business hours that relationship does not stand—as you reminded me this afternoon, there is such a thing as forgiveness and the accepting of an apology by a lady."

Her eyes were fixed upon his face, but they could not detect the slightest trace of irony there, and she asked abruptly:

"Why did you say that you had taken that money?"

"Because I—I thought——"

"That I had taken it?" she demanded as he came to a halt.

And he bowed his head without speaking.

"And you wished to shield me?"

And again he bowed.

"But why? It would have been fairer to have given me a chance of defending myself."

"But," he said, in low tones, "suppose that you had not been able to? I do not want to anger you again. Suppose that, in a fit of desperation, you had yielded to a sudden temptation?"

"You would have screened a thief?" she asked curiously. "Why, are you so pitiful, then——"

"No; it was not that," he answered. "Perhaps anyone else—— Cannot you understand, Miss Grey?"

"No," she answered; "I confess that I cannot. I cannot see why Mr. Marshall Berrimeed should be more concerned about me than about any other girl in the place."

"Ah, a whim, perhaps!" he said. "Well, I am glad you are cleared, and I hope you will forget the pain that I have caused you. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, sir!"

"Won't you shake hands with me?" he asked, seeing that she took no notice of his outstretched hand.

And she looked at him again.

"Mr. Marshall, do you forget that I am a mill-hand, and you are my master? Do you generally offer to shake hands with the girls you employ?"

A mill-hand! She looked the picture of a noble, beautiful woman as she stood there and administered that gentle rebuke. She was determined neither to forget the difference of their positions nor to let him forget it.

"Forget!" he cried. "I wish that I could forget. Will you not shake hands, or have I offended you again by asking this?"

"Good-bye!" she said; and she held out her hand, and he—his fingers closed upon it.

And then, as if that touch broke down all reserve, the danger which Olive had foreseen came.

"I must tell you," he said—"if I anger you I must tell you! I was more concerned about you than any other girl in the place because—I love you!"

"Mr. Marshall!" She started back. "That is not the way in which a rich employer should speak to a poor mill-hand."

And it seemed to him that a contempt shone in her eyes now.

"I know it," he answered. "If you could forget that you were the mill-hand, and I that I was the master——"

"The world could not forget it if we did. Mr. Marshall, the best thing is to forget that you have spoken that word—that is the wisest and best."

"I know it; but it cannot be! I love you! I repeat it calmly. I have loved you, I think, from the very first. It was for that reason that I tried to shield you. It was that love which forced me to speak to you this afternoon. The thought that you could be guilty was a torment, and I wanted to hear you deny it. What mystery is there about you?" he went on, almost fiercely. "You are not as other girls. Why have you come here and brought this to me? No; I do not mean that," he added hastily. "Forgive me, Mary—let me use that name for once—I love you!"

"Mr. Marshall, I will not listen!" she said firmly. "Would you tell your father, your mother, your sister, this?"

"Yes, I would—I will! It may sever me from my father for the time."

"It shall not! If you did this, I would leave here to-morrow. Mr. Marshall, the pride of the master may stoop to the servant; the pride of the servant forbids her rising to the master. This must be forgotten. I am happy and contented here; it rests with you whether I remain so. If you speak of this again I must go."

"That is your determination?" he asked.

And she answered:

"My determination."

"Good-bye! I thank you," he said. "You are wiser than I am, perhaps, only you do not feel as I do. You do not care for me; while I—I—— Good-bye! I will offend you no more by speaking of it."

She watched him as he strode off, and then turned back; but now there was a tender light in her eyes and a soft smile about her lips. Truly this man must love her indeed to do as he had done; and strange that she should smile thus when she had so decidedly rejected that love!

CHAPTER 14.

An Eavesdropper.

THE vicar called for an afternoon visit just when Mrs. Berrimeed was going out. At the time she felt slightly vexed, for his coming caused her to put off her visit. Could she have seen to what that call would lead, she would have viewed it in a far different light.

For, amongst other things, the good man spoke of the strange girl who was employed at the mill, and of the remarkable work she was doing amongst the other girls; and Mrs. Berrimeed, who had heard some faint rumours of the institute, grew interested in spite of herself, with the result that she herself paid a visit to the place, and saw Mary and her friends, somewhat to the girls' embarrassment, and, in a lesser degree, to Mary's also.

But Mrs. Berrimeed did not desire to embarrass; she was pleased, and, as a result, she sent a note to Mary, asking her to call and see her, as she would like to contribute to the upkeep of so useful an institution.

That was about a week after Marshall had told the girl his secret; she had not seen him since. Feeling that his passion was hopeless, he had avoided her, and set himself sternly to work.

Mary hesitated a little at first, but she could not get out of it without seeming ungrateful, and that was repugnant to her nature. Besides, she

told herself that she should not see Marshall; and if she did, she believed that, after what had gone, he would not again strive to speak to her upon that forbidden subject.

So she determined to go, and accordingly dressed herself in her neat black costume, discarding clogs and shawl, and set off; and she was shown into an ante-room, and left, the servant telling her that she would go and announce her to her mistress.

And then, almost as soon as the maid had gone, she heard voices. It was very awkward. Someone was speaking in the room into which the ante-room opened. They evidently did not know that anyone was there, and she could hear every word.

At first she felt inclined to cough, or move, and so give notice of her presence; but the first few words which fell upon her ear caused her to alter her intention, and instead of letting those in the adjoining room know that their conversation was overheard, she crept towards the door that she might hear more distinctly, and also see what was going on through the crack. A most dishonourable proceeding—one so foreign to her general behaviour that only the greatest and gravest cause could have constrained her to do it.

And the cause was grave, for she had heard the mocking tones of Sir Digby Rulph say:

"It is useless to plead, Mrs. Berrimeed. These are my terms. It is either this or publicity."

And then a woman's voice replied—a voice quivering with heart-anguish:

"Have you no mercy? I will kill myself sooner than yield!"

That cold laugh came again.

"That would be foolish. It would do no good. I could still make the truth known; and suicide would only add to the disgrace."

Well might the unhappy woman shrink from the terms which this man proposed. Ever since that first night of his coming he had kept her in suspense. When she begged him to speak he had laughed, and said that he had not yet made up his mind. It was a lie. He was delaying on purpose, partly because his evil nature delighted in her mental suffering, and partly because he told himself that the more that suffering broke her spirit, the easier it would be to get her to agree to his proposal.

And that very evening, almost when the maid had gone to find her mistress, Sir Digby had remarked casually to Mrs. Berrimeed:

"Can you take a stroll with me in the garden? I want a word in private with you."

So it had come, then! She was to know what he had decided upon!

She complied at once; and after a turn or two the man said, still preserving his soft, even tone and his respectful manner, a manner which was in itself humiliation to her:

"Mrs. Berrimeed, I have made up my mind at last. I have kept my promise strictly. No one has heard a hint from me. Now, it will be for you to decide whether the secret is to be kept for good."

"And your price?" she asked in low tones.

"I have thought of that from all sides. In the first place, a thing like this is worth a lot of money, and you could not let me have my price. I mean that a cheque for several thousand pounds could not be procured without your husband's knowledge, and nothing less than several thousand pounds would satisfy me."

"What do you propose, then?" she inquired.

His words made her turn sick with apprehension. If it was not money, what was it that this man wanted?

"Wait!" he continued calmly. "I have also considered your remark

that, even if I had money, I might still betray you. I have thought of a plan which will satisfy myself, and you also. I must have an interest in the family honour."

"An interest in the family honour!"

She repeated the words blankly, not comprehending his meaning; and he smiled.

"Precisely! My terms are these. I am going to propose to your charming daughter—or, rather, stepdaughter—and I want all your interest and influence, both with the father and the young lady herself."

"Going to propose to Olive! You—going to ask Olive to be your wife!"

"Why not?" he answered, unmoved by her horrified expression. "You are surely not going to object to that? You rejected me. What better then, since I may not have the mother, to have the stepdaughter? And you know, my dear Mrs. Berrimeed, that as your son-in-law I should be most careful to protect your honour."

"You are mad!" she panted. "You—a man old enough to be her father!"

"May and December may mate, my dear lady. You know the old saying about the old man's darling. Though," he added, "it is not very complimentary to myself. Hang it, Florrie"—and he used the old hated name—"I am not as old as all that!"

"You Olive's husband! I will never, never yield to it! You—a man without honour——"

"Those who live in glass houses should never throw stones," he replied calmly. "I told you that you would hear my terms, and then you could reject or accept, as you chose. Reject if you like, and that pretty little bundle of letters shall go to your husband."

"Have you no mercy?" she groaned; and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Absolutely none! It is a commodity which I cannot afford to indulge in."

"Let us go in!" she panted. "Someone will notice my agitation. Let us go in! There is no one in the drawing-room."

"With pleasure!" he answered.

And so they entered the house, and as they did so she again cried those words which had arrested Mary Grey's attention, "Have you no mercy?" adding desperately, "I will kill myself sooner! Olive is pure and good," she went on. "Do you think that I will defend myself at the cost of sacrificing her, by striving to induce her to become your wife?"

"There is something else to defend," he answered—"your husband. Ah, he is a proud man—he thinks you a paragon. What a blow to his pride this will be! I have every letter which you sent me. Some of them look as clean and fresh as if they were but sent yesterday; some, as I have told you, are undated and without address. Ah, my dear, what if I declare that they were received by myself from you since this visit?"

"You villain!"

"Oh, pray do not let us have hard names! We can bargain so much better if we keep cool. Admitted that I am a villain. Your own people were in that category, I fear. It will not make this business any less serious because you call me a villain——"

"I will give you money! Two thousand pounds down—I can manage that—and a thousand a year——"

"Won't do! As Olive's husband, I should soon get more than a thousand a year, and I should expect her father to give her more than two thousand pounds as a wedding present. I know you cannot give me my price. I know that only in this way can I really reap the benefit of my foresight

in keeping these letters. Those are my terms. Your secret kept for all time——”

“You will give me the letters—all, every one?”

“Certainly! As soon as Olive is my wife—not before. Marriages can be broken off at the last moment, and once the letters are out of my hands I have no proof. Wonderful, is it not? You did not think, when you filled those dainty sheets with the wild nonsense of a love-sick girl all those years ago, that simply keeping them carefully would make them increase in value to such an extent. Well, do you agree?”

“I cannot—I dare not!”

“Do you dare face your husband? Do you dare face this accusation? Look! I have a good chance—the best I ever had in my life. If it is spoilt it will be through you. Judge how little I am likely to have mercy on you if you reject my offer. I tell you that I will proclaim, not only to your husband, but to the world, that you, my sweetheart in the past, have sought to resume——”

“You cur! You dare even hint such a thing——”

“Oh, yes! Backed up by the letters. I regret that I cannot longer accept my host’s hospitality, but honour demands that I should leave at once. I can get out of it with clean hands; but you—besides all the past coming to light—I can blacken your character so that your daughter shall blush to hear your name mentioned, your husband shall turn from you with a curse on his lips, your son hang his head because of the disgrace, every bare-armed mill-girl shall nod and wink when they see you. Ah, my pretty Florrie—for so I still prefer to call you—I can be a bad foe! And mark,” he added pointedly, “as if to help my cause, though your stage name was Florrie, you sign your letters ‘Kate,’ ‘Your ever loving Katie,’ ‘Your little Katie.’ Ah, I see you understand the seriousness of the situation! Tell your husband. Well, I will sell these letters to the first rag of a society scandal-loving paper. Raise your hand against yourself, and I will see that your secret is remembered long after your death is forgotten. I bid for high stakes. Your stepdaughter and your secret kept, or the whole world to know it.”

“Give me time—time to think!” she moaned, pressing her hands to her brow. “Oh, give me time to think!”

“Certainly! I have no desire to be unreasonable in that respect. I will give you a week. At any time during that period you can let me know your decision. I shall still go on as we have done, and I expect you to do the same. There must be no revealing your secret by morbid looks. You must act your part, if you do not feel it. Mind, I deal fairly with you; I expect you to deal fairly with me. If you mention this to your husband before you have given me your decision, as truly as you stand there I will take care that your secret is published far and near.”

“I will not speak. Let me have time to think! Oh, will no other terms satisfy you?”

“None,” he replied. “It is useless going back to that. You know the only terms which I will accept. Think them over. Weigh what is to be gained by my friendship and lost by my enmity. I think that you will be wise enough to choose the former, and I know that if I have you on my side I shall be successful with my wooing. For the present, farewell. I had better join the gentlemen or they may wonder what we are talking about.”

He stepped out into the garden again, and Mrs. Berrimeed sank down and wrung her hands in anguish.

“What shall I do? It is not only I who will suffer,” she cried; “it is my husband, too! And yet if I defend him I must sacrifice that dear child. Oh, God, is there no one can help me escape from this man?”

"Yes; I can."

The words were spoken very quietly. What was this? Someone was coming from the ante-room. Someone must have overheard the conversation.

"Who are you?" the unhappy woman cried; and the answer came in the same low tone:

"I am Mary Grey, and I can befriend you."

CHAPTER 15.

A Surprise for Sir Digby.

"MARY GREY!"

Mrs. Berrimeed could only repeat the name as she stared in horror at the girl. "How came you there? What were you doing?"

"You wrote for me to call. I asked to see you, and was shown into that room."

"And you have heard all that has been said?"

"All," was the quiet answer. "I could scarcely help hearing."

"You might have given some sign of your presence. It was mean—wicked!"

"No; it was neither mean nor wicked, as you will see if you will listen to me," replied the girl. "I intended to let you know that I was there. but as soon as I heard who was speaking I listened on purpose. Mrs. Berrimeed, pray calm yourself. Your secret is quite safe with me. I do not know it in full—I do not want to know. I only gather that this man holds some letters of yours, and that he demands the hand of Miss Olive in marriage before he returns them to you. Is that so?"

"Yes," came the weary reply.

"How many letters?" demanded the girl, and Mrs. Berrimeed shook her head.

"I can hardly tell. Over a dozen."

"If they are returned, has he any other hold upon you?"

"No; I could laugh at him."

"Very well. Now, I promise you that they shall be returned. I will get them and give them to you myself."

"You!" Mrs. Berrimeed regarded the fair face with mingled incredulity and reawakened hope. "Girl, if you can do that you will make me your debtor beyond repayment. But how can you?"

"That is my secret. If I can keep my promise you must not ask by what means I do it. I can do it—that should be enough—and I promise you that I shall not read these letters, nor allow anyone else to do so. As I receive them, so shall I give them to you."

"Oh, if you can, I shall think that you are an angel sent to help me in my sore need! You can do this?"

"Yes."

"And you will keep my secret? You will not breathe it to anyone?"

"I will never breathe it to a living soul, that I promise solemnly. Now, there is one thing needed. I must have an interview with Sir Digby."

"That is easily arranged. I can ring for him now."

"No, no! Stop!"—as Mrs. Berrimeed rose. "That is, of course, easy; but it is unwise. A secret like this needs guarding carefully. Suppose that anyone learnt that I, a mill-hand, was having a private interview with this man, here in this house, how could you explain it? No; it would never do. It must be somewhere where there is no danger of that. I do not mind

being seen with him myself—that is not of the slightest consequence, but it must be somewhere away from here. It must be as if we had met by agreement.”

“But it will seem strange. He will suspect——”

“Wait! Let me think. I have a plan, though it involves the adoption of a ruse. You must get Miss Olive out of the way to-morrow. If she were at home she might spoil things. Then tell him that Miss Olive will be coming home alone in the evening, across the common by Gabbly Old End. It is quiet there.”

“Yes, yes! And then?”

“Then”—Mary Grey laughed quietly—“simply I shall be there before Miss Olive, and I can promise you that I will have those papers within twenty-four hours. I will go now. It would spoil things if he saw me.”

“But how can I thank you? What can I do?”

“Nothing. I need no thanks.”

“Has this man wronged you in any way? Are you his enemy?”

“Indeed, no!—not more than I am the enemy of every swindler who seeks to do as he seeks to do now. All I ask is, when this is done, forget it—and me. Now farewell, and have no fear. I can, and will, keep my promise.”

The girl left, leaving Mrs. Berrimeed in a state of bewilderment. Who was this girl? Why had she promised to befriend her? And what power had she got over the man, who now held such terrible power in his hand?

But, bewildered though she was, Mrs. Berrimeed determined to follow Mary Grey's directions. The girl's manner inspired her with hope and confidence, and accordingly the next day she invented an excuse which sent Olive visiting early in the afternoon, and then she sought Sir Digby, and followed out Mary's plan.

And a highly-delighted man was Sir Digby Rulph then. He had not calculated upon such an easy victory as this.

The peaceful twilight had deepened into the gloom of evening when he reached his destination, and stood looking eagerly down the road along which Olive must come.

No! He had not been deceived! There in the distance he made out a slight girlish form coming towards him, and with a smile of pleasure he advanced to meet her, and——

He uttered a muttered curse. It was not Olive, after all, it was that girl from the mill—that London girl who looked so like——

So like! By Heaven, it was more than looking like! It was she herself. As she came close there was a look of recognition in her eyes and a mocking smile upon her lips, and she stopped.

He turned, striving to look unconcerned, as if he did not know her; but it was useless. She stopped in front of him.

“Good-evening, Sir Digby Rulph,” she said. And he stared at her in feigned surprise.

“How dare you, girl?” he cried. But she only shook her head.

“Better drop such play-acting,” she said, in matter-of-fact tones. “You knew me from the first, my friend.”

“Then I was right! You are——”

“Mary Grey—a poor girl who has come from London to find work here. Will you please to carry that in mind, Sir Digby Rulph, or I may recognise in you someone whom I knew by a different name, also—someone for whom the police are looking at this present moment!”

He stared at her blankly.

“What does this mean?” he said huskily. “I don't want to talk about

you. You may masquerade as what you like, for all I care. What do you want with me? I am expecting someone."

"I know. Sorry that you will be disappointed. It was I, myself, who arranged that you should be here to-night."

"You!" The man's face darkened with fierce wrath. "You! What do you mean?"

"Simply that you talk too loud. I was in the ante-room at Mr. Berri-meed's and heard all your conversation with his wife."

"Well"—he watched her face anxiously—"what then?"

"Simply that I do not mean you to carry out your threats. You have certain letters belonging to Mrs. Berrimeed. Have you them with you now?"

"No," he answered sullenly. And she nodded.

"I hardly expected that you would carry them about with you. I want those letters. You are to bring them here to-morrow night at this time."

He glared like an infuriated animal. The girl stood there calm and unmoved. He looked around, the place was silent and deserted.

"And what if I refuse?" he asked. And she shrugged her shoulders.

"You will not refuse. You will be wise enough to do as I direct."

"Shall I? I am not sure of that."

"But I am. Let me refresh your memory as to a certain forgery—the proofs of which are in my keeping. Let me also remind you that at this present time the police are looking for a certain person who is passing as Sir Digby Rulph.

"You are pretty bold to come here and tell me this," he said hoarsely.

"I am making a big bid, and suddenly you come between me and my aim, for some purpose of your own."

"To protect a young lady like Miss Olive Berrimeed from such a rascal as yourself!" she retorted calmly.

"The purpose does not matter. Did it strike you that it might be dangerous, meeting me in this lonely place?"

"Oh, yes, I quite saw that! I provided against it," was the calm answer.

"A short distance down the road there is a stalwart young man, who is somewhat indebted to me for a slight service. If I raised my voice, and called for help, he would be here very quickly."

He could only gnaw his moustache. He was beaten! He knew, when he first saw this woman come, that she would best him.

"What are your wishes?" he asked sulkily.

"You will bring the papers here to-morrow night, at this time. You will give them to me. Then you will pack up and clear. Make what excuse you like, but go!"

He laid one hot hand on her arm.

"Some day it will be my turn," he said. "Then we will put this straight, and—Confound it!"

The pair started and turned, for along the road passed Marshall Berri-meed. He saw them, he could not help it; and it looked as if they were standing in the most friendly conversation. A hot wave of something like dismay swept over the girl; but she did not lose her presence of mind, and she said aloud:

"Thank you so much for your kindness, Sir Digby. It was kind of you to be interested."

He took the cue at once—he even caught himself admiring her quick wit.

"Do not mention it."

"You will remember to-morrow night, then?"

"Yes, I will remember." Then, in lower tones: "Curse you, I cannot help myself!"

She laughed and turned away. She had avoided explanations. Marshall would think that the man was doing her some favour, and the man himself was quick enough to invent a plausible story. But still she felt uncomfortable. She was very sorry that Marshall had seen her; it seemed like fate.

What would Marshall Berrimeed think? Mary knit her brows—it was just possible that she did care considerably what opinion Marshall Berrimeed formed.

And Marshall went home troubled, miserable, disappointed. Sir Digby had overtaken him with the remark that he was right about the girl having come from London; but that he had questioned her, and found out that she was innocent, and that he had promised to do her a slight service in return for the bad opinion which he had formed of her. Marshall felt that it was a lie, though he could not say so. Sir Digby had his opportunity. He forced a quarrel—he appeared to be deeply offended—and departed to take a room at the hotel, and Marshall and his father had the nearest approach to a quarrel that they had ever experienced.

But before he went he managed to see Mrs. Berrimeed alone, and to her he said:

“You have bested me this time. But wait. Presently my turn will come!”

And in that way Mrs. Berrimeed knew that the strange girl from London had kept her promise, and defeated this villain.

CHAPTER 16.

A Promise may Cost Much in Keeping.

“I AM vexed, Marshall; I own that I am vexed. If you were a thoughtless, impulsive boy, there might be some excuse; but, as it is, there is none. You have not one word of excuse. I can only say that you have offered a great slight to Sir Digby Rulph, my guest, a gentleman who has extended nothing but the most disinterested friendship to us. If there had been a quarrel of any kind I could understand it. As it is, you have not only interfered in something that does not concern you, but you have actually implied that Sir Digby was speaking falsely when you have not the slightest shred of evidence to prove such a thing.”

It was thus that Samuel Berrimeed spoke to his son late that evening as they sat alone. The mill-owner was angered. His sense of hospitality was outraged at the idea that anyone, and his son in particular, should have so affronted a guest of theirs that he should go to take up his abode at the hotel.

“I am sorry, father,” replied Marshall. “I had no intention of angering you. And, indeed, I cannot own that this quarrel was of my seeking. I certainly was surprised at seeing our guest as I found him, and I certainly did imply that his story was an invention. At least,” he corrected himself, “I received it with some hesitation.”

“You had no right to!” cried the mill-owner. “What right had you to doubt his word? I know the style. Tell a man he is lying right out, and he can answer you; imply it in a half-hearted fashion, and he is deprived of the power to do so. And you mark me, Marshall,” he went on, with increasing heat, “it is my opinion if it had been any other girl than this protegee of yours you would have taken no notice.”

“I should certainly have objected to a gentleman in Sir Digby’s position, and our guest into the bargain, meeting one of our hands in secret. In one sense, we are responsible for the girls who work——”

“Hang the girls who work!” shouted the mill-owner. “Do you suppose

that, if I thought there was any harm in Sir Digby Rulph, I would allow him to remain under my roof an hour? Has he behaved in any but a proper way to either your mother or sister? He explained fully—far more fully than he had any need to. You own that you heard this girl actually thank him for his kindness. Upon your own showing there is nothing but nobility of character. He at first recognises her, and thinks that she is no good—very likely he is right—then he speaks to her. He finds he has wronged her, and, with true gentlemanly feelings he tries to make it up. Some service which he can do her is mentioned, and you must go blundering into thinking wrong of the man.”

Marshall bit his lip. It was quite possible that his father's interpretation was right.

“I am trying to explain, sir,” he said, “that I had no thought of an open rupture with Sir Digby. It appears to me that he was seeking for some excuse——”

“Seeking for fiddlesticks!” came the angry retort. “Why should he want an excuse? He was comfortable here. And if he had not been, if he had wished to leave, he could do so without excuses. The fact is, you do not like him.”

“That I readily admit,” answered Marshall.

“And why not, in the name of common-sense? What single objection can you bring forward? Look you here, Marshall, I don't like saying it, but it is my belief you are making a fool of yourself about that girl, and I won't have it! I shall just tell Dwite to send her packing!”

Marshall looked up quickly. It was on the tip of his tongue to answer that, if Mary went, he would go too! But what was the use of that? After Mary's rejection, and after seeing her there on such friendly terms with that man, it would have been folly for him to do that. He loved his father; he knew how bitterly a separation would have struck him. It would be folly to precipitate matters, and he answered:

“That, of course, you must do as you will. It would be rather unjust to the girl, though, and, moreover, it would seem as if you did not believe Sir Digby's statement any more than I do.”

“Confound it, so it would!” muttered the mill-owner. And Marshall went on:

“As to your hint, sir, you may banish that.”

“I should think so. I am sorry; I did not mean it. You are not such a fool as that. Now, look here! I am going to see Sir Digby, and settle this. If you have insulted him, I shall expect you to apologise. It is only what a gentleman should do.”

“If Sir Digby can point out any particular in which I have insulted him I will certainly apologise,” answered Marshall coldly. “As I have said, he forced the quarrel, and flew into a passion about nothing.”

“It is not like him. He is the coolest man I ever met. But there, I am going to see him.”

And the mill-owner was as good as his word.

Sir Digby could not say that Marshall had actually insulted him. He was shrewd enough to perceive that to make a quarrel was not to his advantage. That London girl might go from the scene presently, and then other ways might open. If nothing else presented itself, there was the chance of making money from these men, of getting them to invest in bad securities, of a dozen things which he was a master at practising.

“As a matter of fact, my dear Mr. Berrimeed, I shall have to be leaving here very shortly,” he protested. “I felt that your son did not like me. He is right in saying that I blazed out a bit. It was annoying to be found as I was with that girl; it looked so confoundedly like a clandestine meeting.

I felt that I was in a false position, and that he thought something was wrong. It annoyed me, and made me hasty."

"Yes, yes; I understand," replied the mill-owner. "Well, now prove that you are not deeply offended. Come back. If you are only going to stay a few days, you may as well stay comfortably."

Come back! There was nothing which Sir Digby would have liked better, but he dared not disobey the commands he had received.

"It's very handsome of you, Mr. Berrimeed," he said. "I tell you what I will do. I will come over again to-morrow. Hardly can come to-night, you know, after I have ordered my room here. I will run over to-morrow. Then I will go up to town and take an early opportunity of returning. That will be the easiest way out of an awkward corner." And with that the mill-owner had to rest content.

He told Marshall of the result of his interview, and the young man had nothing to say. Concerned as he was that he had caused his father any annoyance, he wished, from the bottom of his heart, that Sir Digby Rulph might never show his face inside the place again.

There was little rest for Marshall Berrimeed that night. He could not forget that he had heard Mary make an appointment with the man for the next evening. If he could only be sure that Sir Digby's story was true, and that there was nothing between these two! Marshall Berrimeed was not only suffering from hopeless love—to that the tortures of jealousy were added. A gentleman who had been simply offering to do some act of condescending favour to a poor girl would not have stood with Mary as Sir Digby had been standing. Marshall could have sworn that he was holding her hands as he came up.

If he could only see that interview! His soul revolted from anything mean or underhand, and yet if he could but know! If he had wronged the girl again, how sincerely he would apologise! But if not, if she were deceiving him, then it would be better far that he should know of it and put his folly away. It might cost him something, but it would be best in the end.

And it was with this sophistry that Marshall Berrimeed persuaded himself to do something entirely foreign and repugnant to his nature—to play the part of spy and eavesdropper, and be present at the meeting between these two on the following evening.

And if Marshall's mental state had not been an enviable one, neither was Mary Grey entirely happy in mind. She felt her cheeks flush each time she recalled the look on Marshall's face as he passed by. She told herself that it did not matter in the least what he thought, but she knew that it was not true. In her secret heart it did matter—matter very much.

Mary Grey would not have owned that she cared for Marshall Berrimeed as he cared for her, but she liked him. She had liked him from the first. His manly bearing and courteous treatment had appealed to her, and when he had told her that he loved her—when she had seen the love in his face—even though her common-sense had caused her to reject his proffer, still she could not help feeling interested. She did not like the idea that he should think wrong of her; and yet with that was the indignant thought that he had no right to think wrong, and that if he did she could not help it. He had already been so ready to think her a thief! If he thought wrong now—well, he must—she did not care.

But she did care—cared very much.

The Medsters stared when once more she asked Tom to be her escort. Kitty laughed, and said that she should certainly be jealous; and John Medster shook his head, and said that when he had "walked aat wi' th'

owd woman in their courting days" they did not want anyone to chaperone them.

"Aw'd ha' punched th' yed o' ony felley whoa had coam a-watchin' us," he said. "Bud p'r'aps Lunnon ways are different."

"Perhaps it is not a sweetheart at all," said Mary.

And they all laughed.

"P'r'aps noan, lass, p'r'aps noan. Noan a sweetheart! That's a switcher, that is!"

So, putting up with their banter, wondering what ever they would think if they got to know it was this man she was meeting, Mary Grey went to the place of meeting, and left the faithful Tom to smoke his pipe, knowing surely that he would not so much as lift his eyes to see who she met, even if he had the chance of doing so; and there, waiting for her, she saw the rascal whose plots she had so surely baffled.

"I am first, you see," he said grimly, as she came up. "It is a bit hard on me, your la——"

"Mary Grey, remember," she said calmly.

And he grinned savagely.

"I don't see the need of keeping up that farce while we are alone."

"I do. Give me the papers. I hope, for your own sake, they are all here and untampered with. If you try to play any tricks, it will be hard for you."

"I know. You need have no fear. When I am beaten, I don't squeal. I try to make the best of it. Now, I suppose that I am safe."

"As safe as you were before. I shall do nothing. Not for your sake," she added quickly, "but because——"

"I know—distant relationship—disgrace to friends! I know! Well, that is all! We needn't prolong this; only, if ever the tables are turned, I shall not forget it."

"You are to leave here, remember."

"Yes. I don't know there is anything to stay for now. Only give me a little more time. It makes it so awkward. I tried to get up a quarrel with the son, and so got an excuse to get away. The old man came and begged me to return and leave in a different spirit. Give me another twenty-four hours. You have my word that I shall do nothing to annoy the lady. My teeth are drawn now and I cannot bite. Besides, now that you are interested in it, I am beaten."

"Very well! I have no wish to be unreasonable. Twenty-four hours more."

Oh, fatal concession! Why did not some good spirit reveal to the girl what a terrible power those twenty-four hours were to put into this man's hands?

Sir Digby turned, and went, with a mocking bow and a raising of the hat, and then Mary turned slowly, and Marshall Berrimeed stood before her. She drew back, dismay, surprise, indignation mingling; and yet there was something of pity as she noted his drawn expression.

"Mr. Marshall! You have been spying!"

He flushed as he noted the contempt with which the accusation was made.

"Yes, I have. I wanted to know your business with that man."

"Well, are you satisfied?"

"No; I could not get close enough without risking being seen. I saw him give you something? What was it?"

Mary Grey regarded him in indignant surprise ere she answered.

"Mr. Berrimeed, may I ask what that has to do with you?"

A cutting retort. He bit his lips and endured it.

"Mary, will you not tell me?" he pleaded.

"Miss Grey," she corrected. "I will not tell you. Does my employment in the mill give you the right to interfere with all my actions when work is over? Would any other hand be expected to put up with that?"

"Why did you meet this man? What is there between you?"

"I refuse to tell you anything."

"Tell me what passed between you last night."

"Sir, I absolutely refuse to tell you anything," she replied firmly. "You have not the slightest right to question me."

"The right of being sure that all hands in my employ are——"

He halted. He was going to say "respectable," but he could not fling such a reproach at her. The pause was worse than completing the sentence. She turned a pair of flashing, indignant eyes upon him, and jerked out the very word which he could not utter.

"Respectable? I understand. Mr. Marshall Berrimeed, you can put someone in my place! I shall not return to the mill again."

"Mary!" he cried, in despair.

But she turned and fled—fled to walk home, silent and distressed, by the side of the wondering Tom, that packet of letters in her pocket. She had not thought, when she gave her promise to Mrs. Berrimeed, what the keeping of that secret might mean. But she would keep it, let Marshall think what he would!

Mary Grey cried herself to sleep that night, for a promise made may cost much in the keeping.

CHAPTER 17.

"There is Blood on your Hands!"

A BOMB burst at the Medsters' the next morning. Mary was not going to the mill! She had left, she told them. They could not get more than that out of her.

Their consternation was great—the concern genuine and deep. But there were other mills in plenty; and now that Mary had gained experience, and was a member of the Union, there would be little difficulty in her getting a fresh place. But Mary shook her head, and said—they could scarcely believe it—that she should go back to London—go away from them altogether.

Kitty cried outright, and so did Annie and Bess.

"Wor'll us dew wi'eawt yo'?" was the general question.

What would the institute do, or the home do, or little Kit do, or anything do, when once Mary was gone?

"Why was it? What had happened?" they questioned her again and again, but she would give no answer beyond saying that anyhow she would have gone very soon, and that perhaps they might see her back again before very long. That statement cheered them up a bit, and, taking what crumbs of comfort they could, they left for work. And then Mary put off her mill attire—she had almost grown to love it—dressed herself in her quiet black, and once more set off to Oakhurst Park, and asked to see Mrs. Berrimeed.

Pale with anxiety, but with the light of hope in her eyes, the millowner's wife came, greeting the girl with the eager question:

"Have you succeeded?"

"There was no question of that, Mrs. Berrimeed," was the reply. "I knew that I could perform what I promised. Here are the letters as I received them. I want you to look them through. Tell me if you can think of any more."

With a low cry of relief, and with trembling hands, Mrs. Berrimeed received that precious packet, and looked quickly from one to another of

the letters. They were all there—all. That man had not one now which he could produce! It would only be his word against hers; and, as if to reassure her upon that point, the girl spoke again.

"I do not think that you need have the slightest fear of Sir Digby Rulph dropping even an obscure hint. He will leave here by this time to-morrow at the latest, and then I think he will have passed out of your life."

"How can I thank you?" Mrs. Berrimeed cried. "What can I do?"

"Nothing. The knowledge that I have helped you is reward enough."

"But how did you manage it? What strange power have you, that you can help everyone—rich and poor alike?"

Mary Grey smiled and shook her head.

"Our bargain was that if I did not pry into your secret, you should not seek to discover mine. I have succeeded!"

She almost sighed. At what cost had success been bought? That awful false position in which she had been placed—the contempt of Marshall's look and word.

"And there is nothing that I can do to help you, or to show my thanks?"

"Indeed, no! Yet, stay; I am wrong."

"I can help you, then?" Mrs. Berrimeed beamed as she spoke; and Mary went on:

"In the first place, of course you will not speak of this?"

"Of my secret? Certainly not."

"Nor of my having been able to serve you? To do that would be to have people ask in what way I had served you. It would be awkward. It might entail falsehood. Do not speak of it to anyone."

"If you think it would be best not to," came the doubtful reply; and Mary answered:

"I am quite sure it would be best. Then there is one more thing. I shall go away soon——"

"Go away?" repeated Mrs. Berrimeed. "What, leave the place?"

"Yes. Circumstances will necessitate my returning to London."

"But the institute? This will be a loss indeed! What will the girls do without you?"

"That is what is troubling me. I should be sorry if that work ceased, for I believe that it is doing some good."

"I am sure of it!" cried Mrs. Berrimeed warmly.

"Then, if you wish to do anything for me, can you not keep it going? I do not mean you personally, but you and a committee of ladies. Miss Olive is greatly liked by our girls. She would be a power for good if she went down sometimes. I shall see all the girls before I leave, and talk with them; and if I can tell them that Miss Olive is going to take my place, I think they will keep together."

"You may be sure that everything that I can do shall be done," was the answer. "That was, as you know, why I wished to see you the other evening. I am certain that my daughter will be glad to help."

"The lives of the workers are so grey and monotonous," Mary said. "Unless something is done for them, who can wonder that they go astray? It is all work and sleep. That is why I began the institute."

"I know," said Mrs. Berrimeed. "I wish you were going to stay and work it. You are too good for a mill-hand, Miss Grey. If you were paid to stay at the institute, or if you would care to be here as a companion to my stepdaughter——"

"No; I appreciate your kindness, but it is impossible for me to remain. If I did so, it would be as what I am—a mill-hand. I must go; but if you will take interest in the institute——"

"You may rest assured that I shall."

"Then I shall be satisfied. I shall still collect money for it, and——"

The door opened. Mary Grey flushed deep red, then went somewhat white, for Marshall Berrimeed entered.

"I beg your pardon, mother, I did not know that you were here——" he began; then, seeing who her visitor was, he stopped.

"You need not go, Marshall," his mother said. "You know who this is. I am sorry to hear that Miss Grey is leaving."

He stared. He could not answer. What did this girl do here, with his mother? He looked from one to the other in bewilderment.

"Did you not know that Miss Grey was returning to London?" Mrs. Berrimeed asked again; and then Mary spoke. She saw that Mrs. Berrimeed might blurt out something which would increase the difficulty, and so she said, with the same quick wit which had served her before:

"Oh, yes, Mr. Marshall knows, madam! - It was to him that I gave notice."

"I thought," stammered Marshall, "that a week's notice——"

"I am a piece-worker, sir." The girl was respectful, but defiant. "I thought that I explained to you that I was not returning."

"I tell her that we shall miss her. The institute——" said Mrs. Berrimeed.

"I came to ask Mrs. Berrimeed to interest herself in it. I think it would be a pity to let it drop now."

"A thousand pities," he assented. "Therefore I would ask you if you cannot reconsider your decision. You commenced this work; you can best carry it on."

"Precisely what I have been saying, Marshall," p in Mrs. Berrimeed.

She understood. It was not only the institution on which he was thinking. But she did not relent. She answered quietly:

"No. My mind is made up. I am going back to London. I am grateful to you, Mrs. Berrimeed, for your promise. If I may, I will write to you when I arrive at my destination, and then I can hear how the work goes."

"I shall always be glad to hear from you, Miss Grey."

Mary rose, and Mrs. Berrimeed also, but Marshall spoke again.

"I will see Miss Grey out, mother; do not ring for the servant," he said.

"I cannot have her go without one final attempt to get her to change her mind."

Mary flushed again; then she met his glance with steady defiance.

"If you will accompany me, Miss Grey," he said, "I will take you across the grounds. It will be both shorter and more pleasant than going along the road." And she—how it tortured him!—answered with a respectful "Thank you, sir."

He led her out. He could not let her go without making one last attempt. It was all a horrible tangle, and he might have made a fool of himself again. Be that as it might—he loved her—he could not let her go. She was going, and—— A fresh thought came to torture him—Sir Digby had declared that he was going at once. Sir Digby had forced that quarrel upon him—was it that they might go to London together?

She walked beside him in silence. She knew that he had done this to get her alone, that he might speak with her. He should have his opportunity. After all, he loved her, and it was not nice to think of going away and leaving him to think badly of her.

He halted at last. For once she felt decidedly nervous. They were beneath the shadow of a great tree, and a hedge swept round near by. They were screened from sight.

He looked at her a moment; then he said abruptly:

"And you mean to go away?"

"Yes, sir."

"For pity's sake do not speak like that!" he cried. "You know——"

"That you are Mr. Marshall Berrimeed, and that I am Mary Grey, a mill-hand who has given up her work rather than wait to be dismissed as being an unsuitable companion for the other girls. Oh, yes, I know!"

"Have you no pity?" he groaned. "You can be kind to all others, why are you so hard on me? When you first came, I tried to help you."

A random shot, but it told more than he knew.

"Perhaps I am being most kind in going," she said slowly; but he cried fiercely:

"Kind! Do you know how you torture me? Do you know that I try to turn a deaf ear to the devil's words which will come? Twice have I seen you with a man whom I detest; you will offer me no explanation! Now you go suddenly to London. Why?"

"Because you have made it impossible for me to stay here," she said.

"Or because you know that he is going?" he retorted; and she started.

"Is that what you think, Mr. Berrimeed? Please allow me to pass on. Once you accused me of theft—that passed; now you accuse me——"

"I accuse you of nothing. I entreat, I beg of you to explain. I love you. I am ready to proclaim that love to all the world. I am ready to take my place by your side, and fight life's battles, to give up all this. It will be nothing to me without you. Don't go, Mary; or, if you go, bid me come with you. I love you. I want to trust you. You cannot understand me, perhaps. It is torture to me; I can see that there is something between you and Sir Digby Rulph. I know that the story he told me was false. Put yourself in my place, and imagine how you would feel. Mary, is there no hope for me? Listen to me! You must listen! Do not go. You shall not go!" And in his great eagerness he caught hold of that little wrist with his hot, fevered hand. Not a fierce grip; not a coward's grip; only the despairing hold of one who feels that all he loves is slipping from him and would fain keep it at his side.

But the girl? Her face went deadly white, her eyes started, they were filled with unspeakable fear and horror.

"Mary, what is it?" he cried, in dismay. And then from her trembling lips the awful words came:

"Keep away! Do not touch me! There is blood on your hands—the blood of Margaret Hall!"

CHAPTER 18.

The Tables Turned.

SIR DIGBY RULPH sat at his solitary breakfast in the hotel, and as he consumed his meal he reviewed his position. He was by no means ill-pleased that Samuel Berrimeed had called upon him, or that he had promised to look in at Oakhurst Park ere he departed for London.

It was one of Sir Digby's maxims that it was far better to keep a friend than to make an enemy, and he was prepared to extend a very generous forgiveness to Marshall, partly to retain the young man as an associate to be used for his own ends, and partly to also retain the esteem of the mill-owner.

Bitter as he was at the frustrating of his plans by Mary Grey, he was too astute to let disappointment hinder him in laying the foundations for future schemes. Mary Grey had given him twenty-four hours' grace, and he had nothing to fear from her. He determined that he would not only see the father and son, but Mrs. Berrimeed as well. He rather regretted the hasty threat he had used when he parted from her. It was just possible

that, though she had the letters, she might be willing to pay him presently to hold his tongue. Not yet. He dared not move in that direction while the London girl was here. But she could not remain—of that he was certain—and when once she was gone things might be different.

So, full of affability, Sir Digby went over to Oakhurst when his meal was over, with a self-assurance that was wonderful. He was too hardened to experience even the slightest sense of embarrassment at the prospect of meeting Mrs. Berrimeed, and he was determined that, even with her, he would endeavour to make peace.

"I will tell her that, unless I accept her husband's invitation and come back, he will ask questions, and I may have to talk," he thought. "She won't like the fact that she was once known as Florry Carter to become known, and if I can do nothing else, I can do that. After all, the giving up of the letters is not everything. I will smooth her over, and, if nothing else comes of it, I may be able to draw a few hundreds from her now and again. And every little helps in these hard times."

So in this mood he strolled across to the mill-owner's residence, and entered the park by the end gates—the very gate to which Marshall Berrimeed had promised to conduct Mary Grey; and it came to pass that as he slowly made his way in the direction of the house he became aware that Marshall and the London girl were approaching.

Now, Sir Digby was too shrewd to allow a simple chance to pass neglected, and he had learnt that knowledge meant power. He had merely arrived at the conclusion that there was something between these two, and it might be to his advantage to possess a fuller knowledge of things. A secret belonging to Mary Grey might be worth the possessing. It might also reveal to him the reason for her being here at all.

Therefore, Sir Digby, having made sure that his presence was not known to the others, drew back behind a screen of bushes, and peered through; and he saw that Marshall, instead of conducting the girl to the gates, led her down a side turning. Sir Digby knew it well. It led to a little retired spot, that seemed as if it had been constructed with an especial eye to lovers' flirtations.

Never dreaming that this would be anything more serious than such a meeting, the man crept along, keeping care to remain unseen, until he was near enough to hear all that was said.

He heard Marshall's passionate pleading, and he chuckled to himself as he discovered that he was the object of the other's jealousy.

"I reckon I'll make you sit up, my friend," he muttered to himself. "I can only wish that the girl really cared for him. She don't, that's evident; but if she did I would spoil their plans to a pretty tune. Egad, though, she is mad with him! Thought her a thief, did he? I wonder if she knows that I first put him up to that? Hope not, or she might turn nasty."

And then he ceased, and stood alert, straining every nerve to catch each word, a strange look upon his face, for he had heard Mary Grey's sudden cry of horror as she made that awful accusation: "There is blood on your hands—the blood of Margaret Hall!"

"Goodness," the man muttered, "I am glad I came this way! I would not have missed this for anything!" And with that he seated himself to listen to every word.

Now, Marshall, when that first accusation was made, stared at the girl as though he thought she had suddenly taken leave of her senses. His first feeling was one of intense indignation, and he was going to reply sternly, but the look on her face checked him. This was no idle accusation. Horror was all too plainly written on her face for him to think that. No matter

how extraordinary the charge was, no matter on what ridiculous grounds it was based, Mary Grey certainly believed that what she said was true.

Therefore, mastering his feelings, he replied to her in his calm, grave tones, looking at her all the time he spoke.

"Mary" he said—it was no time to pick words, and he called her by the name which was most in his mind—"you are not the girl to make a hasty and baseless charge, and you are sensible enough to know how grave is the accusation which you have made."

"Tell me that it is not true!" she cried. "Tell me that I have accused you wrongly!"

"And if I do," he queried, "will you believe it?"

And at that she was silent. With the witness before her, how could she believe it?

He understood her silence, and went on.

"You must have some very grave reason for this, and I suppose that you will tell me. But, first, I will do as you ask, whether you believe it or not. I will tell you that I am innocent of everything—entirely innocent."

And she gave a little gasping sigh of relief as she listened to that.

"I knew very little of the girl," he said. "Once or twice I have spoken to her. I was certainly by the cottage that night. If you remember, I had promised to call at the Medsters' to see you. I had business the other side of Gabbly, which was over earlier than I expected, and I walked round that way on my road to Medsters' place. I must have been by there very soon before the murder was committed, or I should have seen you. As it was, if I had not taken the road through the clough I should have met you."

"Now, I own that I might have a good deal of trouble in accounting for my time, for I sauntered along, and did not meet a soul. That much I tell you, and, having done so, I now ask you to explain your charge. I do not ask it as a favour, but as a right; and if you refuse, then I shall go at once to the police, and acquaint them with what you have said, and request them to interrogate you."

"No, no! Do not go to the police!" she cried. "They have the clue!"

"The clue! That mysterious clue that we have heard so much of, and which never led to anything? May I ask what that clue was?"

"A stone," she said. "A stone from a gentleman's sleeve-link. A very fine imitation onyx stone, set with little brilliants of Paris paste. I found it in the child's frock, and it occurred to me that it could have been shaken from the murderer's sleeve-link in the struggle. And you—you wear links like that. Look at them!" And she pointed with trembling finger to Marshall's cuff, which had been exposed as he held her wrists.

The man behind the hedge listened with the utmost attention, and Marshall, after a glance at his links, laughed aloud.

"And because of that you make this foolish accusation against me. Why, you foolish girl, in the first place, I do not wear imitation jewellery. These links of mine are real, and very valuable; and, in the second place, you see that they are perfect. There is no stone missing. Come, look for yourself!"

He held up his wrists for her to see that his words were true, and she examined them eagerly. Then she drew back again, and pointed to one.

"This does not match the others. It seems to have been put in at another time," she said faintly; and, with an exclamation of annoyance at her persistency, the man examined the stone himself.

But then a look of amazement passed over his face—a troubled expression. The girl's words were true. There was one stone which did not match the others.

"What does it mean?" he cried. "Here, I am going to the police-station to see that stone!"

But she clasped his hands in entreaty.

"No, no! How can you be so foolish? Cannot you see how grave this is? One stone is not a match—suppose that the one which they hold is?"

He looked at her in silence. Suppose that it was? The links were unique. If that stone matched the others, how was it to be explained?

"But the thing is preposterous," he said at last. "I had not the slightest cause to wish the girl harm."

"Will people believe it? Less than that has convicted a man before now!" she cried.

"But, my good girl, supposing that such a thing was, and that I was the criminal—in the name of common-sense, do you suppose that I should still continue wearing these links? Why, I should think immediately that the stone had been lost there, and that it was the clue of which such a talk was made."

"I do not know; criminals frequently do such things. But—but— Oh, I will not believe it of you! I cannot believe it of you! You would not do such a thing as this!"

"Thank you for your good opinion," he said quietly. "I can only repeat what I have already said—I know nothing of this. How this stone comes to be different to the others in my links I have not the slightest idea."

"There is some mystery," she murmured; and he replied drily:

"Some very great mystery. So much so that I still feel inclined to go to the police."

"But if you cannot clear yourself—if they suspect you? Oh, no, no!"

"Why, Mary?" he queried. "You speak as if it would make any difference to you."

"To your mother and sister, and to your father," she murmured; and he said:

"And only to them?"

"I—I— It is not fair to speak like that!" she said. "You do not seem to feel how awful this is."

"I realise fully how serious the accusation is, but conscious innocence robs it of its power. I want the mystery solved, that is all."

"Let it remain unsolved," she pleaded; but he shook his head.

"That is impossible. Surely you must see that it is. The truth must be reached."

"But how can it be?" she cried. "How can it be reached?"

"I must think, and— Hark, that is my father calling! Will you remain here for a few minutes, and I will come back? I must talk this over with you. I cannot bear that you should entertain such an idea of me. I know that I have no right to ask it, but will you stay until I return?"

"Yes," she replied, in low tones; and, with a word of grave thanks, Marshall Berrimeed turned and went, just as his father came across the lawns.

"Marshall! Oh, there you are! I thought, perhaps, that you had gone to the mill. But I am glad that you have not, because Sir Digby will be down this morning, and I want you to make friends with him again. Just come in one moment; I only want to show you this note I have received from Dwite."

Taking his son by the arm, the millowner led him in, and then, to Mary's startled eyes, cool, calm, triumphant, Sir Digby Rulph presented himself.

"Ah, I am afraid that I have startled you a trifle," he said, "but you must forgive me! I was behind those hedges, and I could not well come out and spoil such an interesting conversation."

She felt her heart sink, there was such a look of malignant hate in his eyes.

"I told you that presently my turn would come, and it has come far more swiftly than I could have hoped," he went on. "I said yesterday that I was going to leave here. I have changed my mind. I mean to stay, and see if I cannot get Miss Olive for my wife, after all."

"If you stay, you know——"

"That you will do nothing? Oh, precisely! I am a shrewd judge of human nature, as you know, and I can read things clearly. You have a decided liking for a certain gentleman who appears to have been guilty of the slight crime of murder. The only conclusive proof of that lies in the fact that a certain peculiar sleeve-link has one stone different to the rest, and the police have in their possession a stone which will match the other three—a stone, moreover, picked up by you and handed to them. Strange that it should have been your hand to do that. It may be the link which will connect Marshall Berrimeed with the gallows. Now, I want to accomplish certain objects for my own ends; you have pretty well spoilt them. I am going to stop, and the price of my silence will be the hand of Olive Berrimeed. You speak—you put the police on my track! Very well; I take my chance, but the moment that I am arrested Marshall Berrimeed will be arrested also, and for a more serious crime. You understand my meaning? The tables are turned, and it is I, and not you, who make terms now."

She looked at him in silence. She knew only too well that what he said was true. She knew that evidence quite as frail had been sufficient to send a man to the scaffold before now. It was one thing for Marshall Berrimeed to say he was innocent; it would be quite another for him to satisfy a jury upon that point.

He saw her dismay, and laughed again.

"You need not be afraid that I shall speak—yet, at any rate. I am going to do the amiable to the pretty Olive. Presently I shall ask her to marry me, and drop a hint. If that is not enough, I shall turn the screw a trifle more; and if you do anything, everything comes out. Ah, Mary Grey"—and he sneered as he spoke—"I rather fancy that the boot is on the other leg now! The tables, as I said before, are turned, and it is a change in my favour. Remember, speak a word and Marshall Berrimeed will be accused of the wilful murder of Margaret Hall, and you will be principal witness."

CHAPTER 19.

The Story is Told.

SHE stood looking after him, dismay and resolve mingling. She would beat this man. There was no mystery without its proper clue, and she would find it. Olive Berrimeed should never be his wife, and Marshall Berrimeed should not have his name shadowed with dishonour.

She forgot how recently Marshall had brought the hot blood to her cheeks as he hinted things about her. Then indignation had mastered her. Now something else came—it had come in a flash, at the moment that she fancied that he was guilty—the quick revelation of love, the awful knowledge of what this would mean to her, and the indignant protest of her heart that Marshall Berrimeed could not be the perpetrator of so foul a deed.

She stood there, and presently he came back, calm and grave as ever, and then she turned to him.

"Your secret is known," she said. "We have had an eavesdropper."

"An eavesdropper!" He repeated the word. "Who may it have been?"

"Who? The man whom you thought I cared for—Sir Digby Rulph—a bad man to make an enemy of, and he is my enemy!"

"But I thought that you were friends!" he cried; and she shook her head.

"No. I could not explain, because I was concerned in another person's business, and might not betray it. There is no man I have a greater contempt for than that man; and he hates me, and would do anything to harm me. He has it in his power now unless I can frustrate him."

"In his power!" repeated Marshall. "How in his power?"

"Do you not recognise how serious the position is?" she asked. "You do not seem to understand. If Sir Digby Rulph were to make known what he has overheard, your arrest would follow."

"But this is absurd! Why should I want to hurt this girl?" he protested.

"That is not the question. The thing is, how comes it that one of the stones in these links is different to the others, and that the police have one that will match—one found by myself?"

Marshall looked puzzled; he shook his head.

"It is a mystery, I own, but not so great as the other side of the question."

"What other side?" she asked; and he went on:

"What has become of my links, and how am I in possession of these?"

"What!" she cried. "Are these not yours?" And he shook his head.

"No. They are so like them that it wants close inspection to detect the difference—they are an absolute replica; but when you spoke of the stone at the station being false I had a good look at these. They are all false. These brilliants are, as you say, paste. Now, what has become of my links, and how did these come in their place?"

"You are sure that yours were genuine?" she queried.

"Sure! Why, I bought them at Christie's. They originally belonged to the Emperor Napoleon the Third, and he gave them to the Duke of Dainster—Dainster left them to his nephew, and he sold them by auction. It is a queer thing, now I think of it. It was Sir Digby Rulph who told me that they were for sale, and persuaded me to go in for them. He was at the sale with me."

"What!" cried Mary eagerly. "Let me be quite sure. Sir Digby Rulph was with you at the sale? Did he have an opportunity of handling these links?"

"Of course he did. But, Mary, you are not going to say——"

"Never mind. Please answer my questions. After that, did Sir Digby Rulph have opportunity of handling these?"

"He asked me to lend them to him, in order that he might show them to a friend. He returned them quite safely, and I know they were the genuine ones. Why, I am positive I had them after the date of the murder. I remember showing them to a collector after that."

"You are quite sure?"

"Absolutely. If they had been false, he would have spotted it at once. I could write to him, if need be, to get confirmation of the fact."

"Thank Heaven for that! It may be useful, perhaps. Then let me see where we are. You had the genuine links at the time of the murder, and the murderer had these false ones. He lost a stone out of them, and had another made. Why?"

"How can I tell?" he said.

"It is not hard to guess, though. What should he want to go to that trouble for, if he did not want to pass the false off as the genuine, and take the genuine for himself? It is not very hard to arrive at the reason."

"But you half hint that Sir Digby Rulph——"

"I only say that Sir Digby Rulph is a bad man. That I know. He asked you to lend him these links. But if it was not to show to any friend—if it was to get an imitation set made——"

"But you are making out that the man is a swindler! See here, Mary! This is no time for half-hearted accusations. If you know anything, you ought to make it plain."

"I cannot—yet, at any rate. I must go to London."

"For what reason? Have you not forgiven me yet?"

"Yes, yes! Indeed, as we have mutually accused each other, there is little need to talk of forgiveness."

"Is Sir Digby a very great enemy of yours, Mary?" he asked; and she smiled.

"Quite enough to satisfy anyone that I should never meet him for pleasure. Why do you ask?"

"It was he who first hinted at your dishonesty," he replied. And he explained to Mary Sir Digby Rulph's innuendoes, whereat she laughed half contemptuously.

"I am obliged to him. Perhaps, one of these days, I may be able to show how obliged."

But then she turned and went on:

"We are wasting time. I must get away at once. I will let you know my address, and you can write to me if anything transpires."

"But, Mary, why are you doing this, and what is there which you can do which I cannot do also? I cannot have you fight my battles for me!"

"You cannot stop me going to London," she said. "Of course, you can take any action you like, only if you go to the police you may make a great deal of trouble and publicity, which there will be no need for. You said a little while ago that you—you liked me."

"Yes?" he asked.

"Well, if you were in earnest, you might try and oblige me in this. Let me follow my own way for a little while—a week or fortnight. I shall be able to tell then if I shall be successful. I accused you—I put that clue into the hands of the police, and I want to be the one who shall demonstrate your innocence; and by what you have told me, you have put a strong clue into my hands, which I think I shall be able to follow to its end."

"Mary, who are you?" he cried, in wonder. "You are no mill-girl."

"No. I was up to yesterday—I am out of employment now." And she laughed.

"Well, I will not ask you farther, then," he said. "But I will ask you something else—am I forgiven?"

"Yes."

She did not equivocate, or say there was nothing to forgive; she just answered simply and plainly.

"Thank you. Now, one more question. Why are you doing this, taking all this trouble about me?"

"Because—I—I——" she began; and then she stopped. She knew what he wanted her to say, but the saying of it was not an easy matter.

"I am only a poor mill-girl, you know," she said, "and your father would not agree."

"Suppose we leave that for the time," he answered. "Mary, will you tell me, plainly and truly, do you care for me? Sometimes I have hoped that you do, then I have felt that I was deceived. Tell me once that it is so, and I shall be satisfied—I shall have no more doubts. Do you care that I love you, Mary?"

And then she looked up into his face, her eyes full of the love-light that would no longer be hidden, and she answered:

"I care very much, and I love you—love you so much that your doubts were doubly cruel."

"Oh, forgive me, and forget them!" he murmured; but she continued:

"But when that is said, there still remains the fact that I will never marry you unless your father consents; and I will never agree to your doing anything which will separate you from him. I shall never love anyone but you, but I will never let your love for me bring discord into your home."

"Then we will wait patiently, Mary," he answered, stooping over her and taking her hand in his own. She did not resist now. "Mary, will you seal that with a kiss?"

She blushed rosy red, but she held up her face to his; and there, where but a short time before she had drawn back in horror, thinking him the murderer of Margaret Hall, she suffered him to press a kiss upon her lips. And nothing had happened to prove him innocent! It was but the conviction which came from seeing his calm face and hearing his avowal of innocence, but to Mary Grey it was of more weight than a world's testimony would have been. She knew that Marshall was innocent, and she told herself that she would prove it ere very long.

Then she took the sleeve-links and went to the station, and asked the police if they would let her look at the stone which they had. They were very curious, and wanted to know why; and when she told them that she had seen a link like it they grew eager, and desired to be told where the link was to be seen. But that Mary Grey was not going to answer. She told them that she was going to try and obtain it, and that as soon as she had it she would bring it to them. They scolded, argued, and did all in their power, but Mary was unmoved. It was not in her plans to let the police at the station into her secrets.

And then she turned her face towards the Medsters' little home. Her course was clear, her work before her. She must bid them good-bye that afternoon, and go to London by the first train.

She was happy and excited—excited because this task of solving a mystery, running down a rascal, and clearing an innocent man's good name appealed to her; but happy because this coil of trouble had brought about something which she had not thought possible before.

It was true that Marshall Berrimeed had told her that he loved her, but the suspicions which he had entertained—the memory of them was still able to call a blush to her cheek—had formed a separating gulf, which seemed to forbid all bridging.

From the first she had liked Marshall, though she had not looked into her heart enough to see whether liking and love were not the same; but when she was confronted with his peril—and though he did not seem to realise it, she knew that the peril was real—then love asserted itself.

She would clear him, she would free Olive Berrimeed from the horror of having to sacrifice herself to such a man as this Sir Digby Rulph, and then she would come back, and— She smiled as she thought of that. Marshall Berrimeed had wooed her as Mary Grey, the poor London girl, and as Mary Grey she would return; but afterwards— Ah, that was her secret, and she could keep that as well as she could keep Mrs. Berrimeed's sad story!

And Marshall Berrimeed himself—ah, what a different Marshall he felt now! Mary did love him, after all. He had seen that love shine in her dear eyes, he had heard it whispered from her lips. Truly, the world seemed a different place to Marshall Berrimeed now.

That he was puzzled was but natural. He could not understand Mary. That she was a lady by birth and education, he felt certain. Many a lady

had fallen upon adverse circumstances, and had been compelled to face life's bitter battle. Well, if that were so, so long as she was a lady his father ought not to care; and if he did—— Ah, Marshall stopped at that.

Mary had declared that she would never be his wife unless his father consented, and he knew her well enough to be sure that she would keep her word.

Still, that could wait. She was not going now, angry and indignant—he was not to be left hopeless and wretched. He felt that he could even thank Sir Digby Rulph, since it was he who had, in great part, contributed to this change.

His happiness was so great that it almost drove away any thoughts regarding the grave charge which might be levelled against him, and the mysterious way in which those sleeve-links had been changed. Mary seemed to understand that far more than he did, and she more than hinted that this man, Sir Digby, was at the bottom of it. Strange that from the very first he had distrusted him!

Still, he must wait. She had asked him to go back, and take no notice. He would wait until Sir Digby himself made a move.

And he had not long to wait. Sir Digby met him almost as soon as he reached the house, and came up to him bland and cheerful.

"Ah, Marshall, I am glad that I have met you! I don't know whether you have seen that London girl again."

Marshall started indignantly.

"I have seen Miss Grey, if it is she to whom you refer," he replied; and the other nodded.

"Quite so. Then I suppose that she told you how I chanced to overhear something?"

"She told me that you were listening to our conversation. I reserve my opinion about it."

Sir Digby eyed him sharply, and then smiled.

"Look here!" he said softly. "You don't like me—somehow you never did like me. All the same, it will be as well for you to remain on friendly terms with me. A charge of murder is an ugly thing, you know; and for all your treating it so lightly, this one would be a bit blacker than you appear to think. It is as well to remain friendly."

But to that the answer came, cold and unmoved:

"I neither desire your friendship nor fear your enmity, Sir Digby Rulph." And with that Marshall turned away.

The man stood regarding his retreating form with an expression which boded him but little good.

"So, my friend," he muttered, "it is to be defiance. Well, I rather fancy that I may make you change your tune before long. Her ladyship is dangerous, certainly; but I hold a winning card, and I shall play it presently."

But Sir Digby Rulph had not the slightest idea of the thoughts in "her ladyship's" head, nor of the purpose which was inducing Mary Grey to go to London that very day.

CHAPTER 20.

An Unlooked-for Link.

"**A**N' yo' aw goin' naa? We 'ull nor feel th' same wi'aat tha, Mary." So said John Medster when Mary arrived as the family were gathered for the midday meal, and announced her immediate departure.

It brought the tears to her eyes to see their genuine distress. They were simple and humble folk, hard-working and poor; but their love was dis-

interested and heart-whole, and she hastened to assure them that ere long they would see her again.

"I may be back very soon," she said. "And while I am away I want you to think of me."

"Why, we corna help doin' that, lass!" came the reply. "Tha hast done too much kindness t' us fo' us to forget tha."

"And I want Annie especially to work hard, and keep the girls at the institute. Miss Berrimeed is going to come and help, and some ladies——"

"They wullna be yo', Mary," sighed Annie dolefully. "Aw wull do wor Aw con, bud the girls wullna loike onyone efter yo'."

"But you must try and make them," she answered. "I should be sorry when I have gone to think that they did not attend."

And again Annie promised to do her best.

And then good-byes were said, while both Charlie and Kit clung to her skirts and howled dismally, until soothed by the promise that when she came back she would bring them some wonderful toys if they were good; and at last it was over, and she was seated in the train, whirling back to mighty London upon her mission to save Marshall and to defeat Sir Digby Rulph.

But those who knew Mary Grey, the mill-girl, would have been bewildered could they have seen the beautiful, faultlessly-dressed lady who, the next morning, descended from a carriage, and entered the door of an office in the City bearing the simple inscription "Stephen Redman"; and one of them—Sir Digby Rulph—might have been considerably perturbed had he witnessed that incident, for he, and he alone, would have been able to say that Stephen Redman was the shrewdest, the cleverest, and, withal, the most famous private detective of his generation.

He sat at his desk—a tall, quiet-looking man, with keen, watchful eyes, and face indicative of calm self-reliance; and as soon as her card was handed to him he directed her to be shown in, and placed a chair for her, saying:

"Your ladyship requires my services? I trust you have not been defrauded again. I warned you that your clemency was ill-timed."

"It is not myself this time, Mr. Redman," she answered, "though it is a business in which I am greatly interested—a very intricate matter, such as you alone can solve, if solved it can be."

The keen eyes flashed for a moment, but the grave face never altered its expression as he answered:

"I thank your ladyship for the compliment. I need not say that my best services shall be at your disposal."

"I am sure of that. Now, if you will allow me, I will tell you my story, and then I shall be glad of your opinion."

He nodded, and Mary, opening her purse, produced from a little piece of thin tissue-paper Marshall Berrimeed's sleeve-links, and handed them to him, saying:

"Will you look at these? They are the only clue I have got."

He examined them closely, first by going to the light, and then with the aid of a strong glass.

"Imitation," he said, and she replied:

"Of course. Even I could see that."

"One stone does not match. It has been put in at a later date than the others."

"How can you tell that?" she queried.

And he smiled, a slight, winning smile.

"I can see a trace of cement, and—stay!" He turned the links over. "Here is another mark; and though, of course, I cannot be sure, I should say it was blood."

"Where?" she cried excitedly.

And he handed her the glass.

"There, in the border. You see that three of the small holes in the gold-work are blocked by some dark substance—just there."

"I see now," she answered. "Your eyes are very keen."

"It is my business to note things, your ladyship."

"Well, it is very likely that you are right in your conjecture," she answered, as she placed glass and link on the table. "But now for my story. Did you hear of a murder some few months back which took place in Old Gabbly? A woman named Margaret Hall was found strangled, and with some severe wounds in her head."

"Oh, yes! I was rather interested in the case. The police arrested a young mill-worker; and some girl came forward and gave them a clue, and managed to satisfy the coroner's jury that the accused man was innocent. Rather a smart girl, I should say."

Mary smiled, and the calm detective opened his eyes as she answered:

"Thank you! I happen to have been that girl. Of course, I do not want that mentioned yet. These links have to do with that murder."

"One moment, your ladyship."

The detective wrote a name on a slip of paper, and turned it face downwards on the table.

"As you know," he said, "we do not often indulge in guesses; but I do not mind hazarding that the name which I have written there will be that of the man whom you connect with the crime."

But at that Mary shook her head.

"I do not connect any man with it," she answered. "It is a mystery beyond me at present. But let me explain."

And with that she described how she had found the stone from the link and given it to the police.

"They have it still?" he queried.

And she replied that she had seen it previously to her leaving for London.

Then she went on to say how she had seen the links—she did not at the moment mention Marshall Berrimeed's name—and again he interrupted her.

"Then the matter should not be very difficult. The missing stone should be a conclusive piece of evidence."

"But the difficulty is that I do not believe that the gentleman who owns the links is the murderer. I am interested—very interested—in proving his innocence, the more so as Edward Lameer knows of the matter, and is using it for his own ends."

"Ah, I thought we should ultimately arrive at that name," said Mr. Redman. "But go on—tell me all the particulars."

So Mary told him how Marshall had bought the links, and how Sir Digby had been with him, and how he had undoubtedly possessed the genuine ones after the crime had been committed.

"I am certain that he is an innocent man," she explained earnestly. "I believe that Lameer must have had something to do with it, though how or why I cannot think. That is what I want you to solve. As soon as I saw him there, masquerading as Sir Digby Rulph, I knew that he was up to some mischief. It would have been better, perhaps, if I had proceeded against him for that forgery."

"Very much better!" murmured the detective. And she continued:

"He was with Mr. Berrimeed when he bought the original links. He, indeed, persuaded him to buy them, and he took them away to show a friend."

"To get copies made," came the detective's interjection.

"That is what I at once thought. But, then, he was not in the place until after the murder."

"Your ladyship, it is as clear as daylight as far as we have gone, though it may be a task of some little difficulty to prove it. The first idea of Lameer's is to get the original links and dispose of them—as he could do—for a considerable sum. To do that he must have imitation ones to put in their place, as, if the owner missed them, the matter would be made public, and the links would have been recognised if offered for sale. He gets the forgeries—if I may call them so—and wears them. He commits this murder, and finds he has lost a stone. That means that he must return and get the loss made good; but, being in a hurry now, he is not so particular about the stone matching, or perhaps he did not examine the thing as carefully. He returns to the North, exchanges the links, probably sends them at once to his accomplices in London to get them sold before anything can be found out; and then, when the murder charge crops up, and an innocent man is accused—well, it is not difficult to guess what he would do. Now, see, before I knew the particulars—before I knew anything about these links, I wrote the name of the murderer of Margaret Hall here. Look!" He handed her the paper as he spoke, and there she saw written the name "Edward Lameer."

"But how do you arrive at that conclusion?" she cried. "What do you know which should make you connect Edward Lameer with Margaret Hall?"

The detective took a book down from a shelf near and opened it. It was full of written passages, mingled with cuttings from papers. He turned to one page, over which the name of "Lameer" was written.

"Here we are!" he said. "After the business over the cheque I lost sight of him. He went to France—that is my last entry. I did not know that he had returned. Presently I shall add what I have now learnt, and so bring the record up to date. But here we have the connection with Margaret Hall. Six years ago he was performing on the music-halls, doing sketches with a girl named Hall. Here we have it—'Lameer and Hall'—you see. The show did not take, and he abandoned it, and then turned up to play on society—as he has done ever since—under the name of Lord Bryant."

"What name?" cried Mary excitedly. "Lord Bryant! Was Edward Lameer ever passing under that name?"

"Yes; about five years ago."

She sat still and silent for a little. Sir Digby Rulph, her own disreputable relative, was the man who had taken poor Bertha Medster away!

"I appear to have put you on a fresh track, your ladyship," Mr. Redman observed. "Have you ever known him by that name?"

"Yes. I felt surprised; it is as though a higher hand than any on earth had guided me. I have actually been living with a family whose eldest daughter—Bertha—was enticed away to London, five years ago, by a man named Lord Bryant. She was abandoned and left to die, and her poor people feel that disgrace as the greatest sorrow of their lives."

"Ah, I remember that there was a girl! I fancy that was the cause of the quarrel between him and the fair Margaret; but she soon disappeared—so far as I know. She certainly was with him in Scotland, and—by George!"

"What is it, Mr. Redman?" she asked anxiously, as he struck his hand on the table.

"This will bear looking into," he said. "It may have everything, or nothing, to do with the murder of Margaret Hall. If the man was living with that girl in Scotland as his wife—which will have to be proved—then, by Scotch law, they were actually married. If Margaret Hall knew that, it would spoil his plans. Perhaps he may have contemplated marrying someone else."

"He did!" she cried. "He contemplated forcing Mrs. Berrimeed to persuade her stepdaughter to accept him!"

"There it is, then! Margaret Hall, living there, would be in the way. She came back from the North for a little while with him, and she had a young infant with her, that I know. Then she disappeared, and the next I heard of Lameer was the affair of his forging your name. If we can but get that Scotch address! Can you get any information? Do the parents of the girl know anything?"

"I cannot say. But I will go and see at once. It is only a journey north again."

"You are as keen as I am," he said.

And she answered earnestly:

"I am, indeed! If I could but prove that the poor girl was legally married! Mr. Redman, will you do what you can about these links? The thing—the first thing—is to connect the man with them. You know where the real ones would most likely be sold. I know you are famous at tracking stolen jewels." He bowed at the compliment. "Can you begin at once? Spare no expense. If you can link the man with either the sale of the real or the procuring of the false links, then there is something to go upon."

"You would proceed this time, then? No more letting him go?"

"No. In the first place, it is for the sake of those whom I lo—I respect highly; and in the next, Lameer's mother is dead, and it was for her sake mostly that I hushed the other matter up. Discover what you can."

"But the other matter?" he queried; and she replied:

"It is not so important—at least, I do not think so. Besides, I will attend to that. It is quite simple—only making straightforward inquiries. If I can only find that they were in Scotland, I will go on myself and ascertain all that I can. I will write you at once, and see you shortly. I give you a free hand in regard to money. Good-bye!"

She rose, and the detective bowed her out. Then he came back, a quiet smile on his face.

"Now, I should say," he mused softly, "that this Marshall Berrimeed was a decidedly lucky man—a most decidedly lucky man. And there will be a fashionable wedding before very long if things go as I think they will."

CHAPTER 21.

The Truth Will Out.

"MARY! Mary! Oh, muther, heer's Mary!"

Mrs. Medster had heard the door open, and the combined yell of delight from Bess, Charlie, and Kit brought her running in from the little garden, the soap-suds still on her arms.

Mary stood there, the three children clinging to her, and she cried:

"Why, Mary, tha hast coam bac' sewn, an' tha art as welcome as th' flowers in spring!"

"But I have not come to stay, Mrs. Medster," she answered. "Not longer than one train, anyhow."

"Wor! That art goin' bac' next train?"

"Yes. I want to talk to you—to talk to you alone."

"Heer, come in heer!" the woman said, opening the little best-room door. "Naa, wor is it, lass? Na trubble, Aw hope?"

"No. I have come all the way from London to ask you something—something that may seem a bit strange, but I have good reasons for the question."

"You hav' allays good reasons for all you do, Mary," was the answer.

"First, I want you not to speak of what I am going to say—not yet, at any rate. Mrs. Medster, you know that Tom was accused of murdering Margaret Hall, and some people, even now, try to make out that he did it?"

"Ay, lass, that's true enuff!"

"But, Mrs. Medster, there is another innocent man accused, and that is Mr. Marshall."

"Wot!" cried Mrs. Medster. "Mr. Marshall! Aw'm capt! Whoa says that he did it?"

"I cannot tell you; only I am trying to find out something. Mrs. Medster, I think that the man who killed Margaret is the same man who took your Bertha away."

Mrs. Medster sat down and stared at the girl.

"He wor Lord Bryant," she said slowly; and Mary nodded.

"Yes; I think that I know him. But I want some help. I want to find where he lived. Now, did your poor daughter ever speak of having been in Scotland?"

"Ay, hoo did. Hoo said hoo had been."

"Did she say where she had been?" was the eager question.

"Na. Hoo said hoo had been, that's aw."

"Can you tell me where she lived in London? I must find something out."

"Na. Hoo lived at an hotel at last. Aw knaw, fo' when th' mon run away he didna pay th' bill, an' feyther he paid it—at least," she corrected herself, "th' lady wot helped aar lass paid it, an' feyther he paid her."

"Can you tell me where that lady lived?" queried Mary desperately.

And, to her joy, Mrs. Medster could do this. At least, here was somewhere to begin her search! There remained nothing more but to hurry back. But ere she went she asked for a sheet of paper and envelope, and she wrote a note to Marshall Berrimeed.

"There is only one thing that you can do for me, Mrs. Medster," she said, "and that is—do not tell anyone what I have spoken of. If you do, all my work may be in vain. Will you promise?"

"Ay, lass! Aw wullna breathe it, nor even to th' owd mon, tin yo' say Aw may."

And then Mary left, and hurried back to the train, posting her note on the way.

Only Sir Digby Rulph, strolling along, saw her—saw her post the letter and hurry to the train, and he found food for pondering. What was she doing, and why was she here, and who had she written to?

Sir Digby was both puzzled and troubled, and he determined to keep an eye on all letters that arrived at the Berrimeeds' that day.

Back to London she hurried, taking no thought of fatigue, so eager was she now. She went to the address given to her by Mrs. Medster, fearing that the people might have left, and was relieved to find her fears were unfounded; and presently she sat in the presence of a dear old lady, with silver hair and angel face—at least, so she thought as she looked at her.

"I am come to see if you can help me," she said, in explanation of her visit—"help me to save an innocent man from blame, and to give comfort to the hearts of some honest people."

"You may be sure that I will, if I can, my dear young lady. Is it money?" began the old lady.

"No, no! Only a little information. Do you remember helping a poor girl some four years ago? You sent to her parents. Her name was Medster."

"Ah, yes, poor child, I remember well—I remember!" And the old lady wiped away a covert tear.

"Madam," said Mary, "I am trying to prove that she was legally

married, amongst other things. Only I cannot trace her movements. Can you tell me the name of the hotel at which she stayed with the man—the one where you paid the bill, and so got her boxes away?”

“Yes. I have the bill still. I always keep such papers. I will go and get it, if you do not mind being left for a few minutes.”

Mind! She would have sat for a whole day, if only she could have gained any information. How eager she felt, and how confident! It seemed as if she were being guided with each step she took. The old lady came back, a neatly-folded bill in her hands.

“Here it is! I was certain that I had got it filed away. I do hope that it will prove of use to you!” she said; and Mary thanked her and left.

Euston Road! Had it been Land’s End she would have journeyed thither. It was quite possible that the place had changed hands, but the books were likely to be in evidence; and if they had at any time gone from here to Scotland, it was quite possible that they might have left an address, to which letters were to be forwarded.

Arrived at last! The name was the same, anyhow. A little, unostentatious place, with the name Stewart over the door. A Scotch name! Mary went in, and asked to see the proprietor.

“If you want rooms, I can attend to you, madam,” said the clerk; but she shook her head.

“No; I wish to see the proprietor, if you will kindly give him my card.”

The clerk glanced at it, and became polite at once. He bade her take a seat, and in a few minutes a stout old fellow entered.

“You wish to see me, your ladyship?” he asked; and her reply was:

“You are Mr. Stewart?”

“At your ladyship’s service.”

“I want a little information from you, Mr. Stewart, if you can supply it. Will you look at this?” And she handed him the bill.

He looked at it, calmly and slowly, and then looked at her.

“Well?” he said, evidently not comprehending things.

“That is a bill from this hotel, is it not?”

“Quite right, your ladyship.”

“Can you remember the particulars?”

“Eh? I am afraid not. We have had a few bills made out since then, you see,” was the dry answer. “But I can look it up. What do you want to know about it?”

“Let me refresh your memory. That debt was incurred by a man named Lord Bryant. He was here with a young woman. He ran away and left the girl, and you had to turn her out.”

“Heh! I remember it now!” he cried. “To be sure, I remember the poor girl. I was sorry for her, but, of course, I could not keep her. Afterwards someone came and paid the bill. But,” he added, “why do you say ‘Lord Bryant and a young woman’? This is a respectable hotel, and the lassie was his wife.”

“He said that she was. I am not imputing anything wrong in the conduct of your business.”

“He said she was, and she was,” the old fellow replied firmly. “For all that the scoundrel took away her wedding-ring before he left, I know that she was.”

“But how can you know?” persisted Mary. “A ring is no evidence.”

“Maybe not, your ladyship. But, you see, they came here, and then they had business in the North.”

“Yes, yes,” cried Mary eagerly, “I know that much!”

“Well, we Stewarts are a neighbourly set, and like to help each other;

and my own cousin, Sandy Stewart, he has a place away in Edinburgh, not a step from the station. The Thistle and Crown it is; and when I knew they were going to Scotland, I made bold to tell them that they could not do better than go to Sandy, he being a good honest body; and they went, and stayed there, and from there they came back; and Sandy, forby, was more lucky than me, for they paid his bill, and I nearly lost getting my money."

"But, even then, how do you prove that they were married?" queried Mary. She remembered the detective's words, but she wanted to get all she could from the landlord.

"How? Your ladyship, Scottish law is different to English! 'Tis decent and wise, for the staying of scandal; and they were some months at Sandy's place. If in Scotland two people stay for twenty-one days as husband and wife—if they only call themselves husband and wife for twenty-one days—they are married as fast as the minister could tie them. It is an irregular marriage, but it's one that they won't get out of easily. You ask old Peter Donaldson, the lawyer—he lives not far from Sandy's place—what Habit and Repute means, and he will tell you. Ay, the lass was Lady Bryant, as sure as he was Lord Bryant; and the ween, if it had lived, would ha' been able to look the world in the face and feel no shame."

"Was there a child, then?" she asked.

"Ay, born at Sandy's place; and forby Sandy's guid woman was as excited as could be. She told the woman that it was next door to murder to take the child from its poor mother, and so it turned out. The child died—at least, so the father said—and the poor young mother drooped as though her heart was broken. That's all I know about it, your ladyship."

Mary thanked him and left. A child! And then Margaret Hall came back with a child, and that child was little Kit—little Kit, now at the Medsters' home! She had often remarked how like Charlie he looked—as if they had been brothers—and Mrs. Medster would sometimes say that his eyes reminded her of Bertha's, and that was what made her love the little friendless lad so much.

If—if it was Bertha's child! It seemed too impossible, but she would get to the bottom of it! Mary Grey that same evening was speeding northward again, not to Lancashire but to Edinburgh, fast as the Scotch express could carry her.

And the worthy Sandy Stewart proved to recollect things even more clearly than his cousin in London did. He remembered the incident of the Bryants' stay.

"Married!" he said. "Ay, if they were not married before, by Scotch law they were tied tight enough ere they left. Why, they dined wi' the clergyman from the manse, and with Laird Robbie, and he a justice, too! What more would you be wanting than that? Peter Donaldson? Eh, he lives close by! He will remember, and he will give you a certificate to the fact, if ye want it. There is no mistake, your ladysip—no chance of mistake—unless either party had been married before, in which case they committed bigamy."

Mary was not satisfied until she had seen the lawyer, Donaldson, and from him got an affidavit that he knew the two as Lord and Lady Bryant; and then she returned, and questioned the landlady as to the child.

"A bonny bairn it was," the old lady said, "and sore the puir lady greeted when her husband took it from her—he said she was not strong enough to rear it. And he gave it to the keeping of some wench who came here for it. I remember her—he called her Margaret; and I thought she looked with a dour eye upon the innocent as it lay in her arms. She took it away, and the next we heard was that it had died on the journey South;

and I can well believe it, for whoever heard of sending a week-old bairn such a journey as that, and no mother to comfort it?"

"Did you see the little one?" asked Mary; and the old lady repeated the words.

"Did I see it! Deed and I did; and nursed it while the mother slept. A little blue-eyed mite, with skin as spotless as an angel's save that one little arm—the left, I think—had three moles in a little bunch just above the elbow."

Three moles! Mary Grey needed no more evidence. Little Kit had three moles on his little arm, just above the left elbow. Her task was over; and hoping that the detective had met with like success in his work, Mary Grey once more took her place in the train, and sped back to London.

The truth was out at last, and she understood now why Sir Digby Rulph had murdered Margaret Hall!

CHAPTER 22.

Sir Digby Rulph Makes a Move.

"WHAT is the matter, Marshall? You look very troubled."

Marshall Berrimeed looked up as the question came. He had been seated in the garden pondering, and Olive had stolen up behind him, asking the question as she wound her arms about his neck.

And, in truth, there were grounds for the query, for Marshall looked careworn. He had been brooding over things; and despite the joy which the knowledge of Mary's love brought, he could not disguise the fact that, for them, the course of true love was unlikely to run smoothly.

He felt she was far above the humble station which she occupied—a queen in disguise—but would his father view things in the same light?

True, Samuel Berrimeed had married for love; but then, his wife had been in a station far above that which poor Mary occupied. Pride and prejudice alike would be opposed to the union; and Mary had said that she would never become his wife save with the full consent of his father.

Then, so far as he could see, that meant waiting for years; for he was certain that consent would not be forthcoming. Little wonder, then, that Marshall felt troubled, and that his looks betrayed his feelings.

And then, beyond that, there was this awful mystery concerning his sleeve-links. Now that he had had time to calmly review the matter, he saw how grave it was; and though he might call it absurd to even hint that he had any hand in the murder of Margaret Hall, it would be an entirely different matter to prove it to the world.

And if the matter did come to light, what disgrace it would bring! How people would talk; what hints would be given! He thought of his father, his stepmother, and his sister, even more than of himself. Marshall Berrimeed was no fool—he knew how easy it was to set scandal going, and how hard to arrest its course.

How came the links to be changed, and who was it that had changed them? Mary more than hinted that it was Sir Digby Rulph, but he could not understand that. Much as he disliked him, he believed him to be a man of wealth. It was inconceivable that he would want to steal the real links, even if it meant a matter of a hundred pounds. And even if he did, he had not arrived until after the tragedy at Gabbly Old End. The more the young man pondered the less he could understand. Mary had said that she could help him; but then, how? What did she hope to learn from going to London?

And then, Sir Digby knew his secret, and if he spoke—supposing that Mary could discover nothing—what an awful position might be entailed!

"Is it about that girl?" his sister whispered, seeing that he did not answer at once. "Is it because she has gone away?"

"Partly about her, sis," he answered slowly, and she sighed.

"Poor Marshall! Does not the trouble grow lighter?"

"If by that you mean do I love her less—no, Olive," he returned. "I love her more than ever, and I am more and more convinced that she is a noble woman, and worthy of the love of a better man than myself."

"That could not be; there is no better man than my dear brother."

"What a faithful little sister it is!" Marshall said, giving one little hand a squeeze, and Olive went on:

"You have not told her anything, Marshall?"

"I have," he answered, and Olive looked still more troubled; but with all a woman's curiosity to hear a love story, she queried:

"What did she say, Marshall?"

"She said that she loved me, Olive," he answered quietly, "but she also said that she would never consent to be my wife unless father himself consented—she would never bring discord between us."

"That was good," came the thoughtful answer. "And is that why she has gone away so suddenly?"

"Not altogether," he answered. "She had some business which took her to town."

"If she were only someone different!" sighed Olive. "But a mill-hand! Let her be ever so nice and refined, people would never forget that."

"It would be better if people would mind their own business," he retorted, but she shook her head.

"But they will not. It is one of the penalties of being someone. The workers can do as they like, and no one thinks of them; but let one of us traverse any of society's unwritten laws and the world is up in arms. Are you going in, Marshall?"

For he had risen, and was turning towards the house.

"Yes, dear. There is Sir Digby crossing the lawn, and I do not want to see him."

"You dislike him so much?"

"I positively loathe him," was the vehement reply. "I wish that he had not come back."

"Oh, come! I think you are prejudiced! I find him very nice and amusing. But there," she added, "you go in, and I will make excuses for you. We must not be rude to father's guest."

Now, Sir Digby was also somewhat perturbed. He could not understand that sudden visit of Mary Grey's, and he was frightened of her. How she could harm him now, he was not quite sure; he was certain that the little matter of the forged cheque would be kept secret—she would not open her mouth while he, in return, could send Marshall Berrimeed to take his trial for murder. But then he was afraid—she was a clever woman, and it was possible she might find out something even more serious than forgery.

Sir Digby had been pondering, and he had made up his mind. He was a bold man, and ready to take desperate measures. Audacity, he knew, would win where diffidence failed; and he had made up his mind, and was about to make a move.

There was one way which presented itself to him, and won his approval. It was no use waiting to see if that girl did anything; the wisest thing was to ensure his safety at once, and the best way to do that would be to

reveal his hand to Olive—to frighten her into accepting him; and then, if nothing was found out, he was safe—the forged cheque would never revive; and if a discovery was made, was it likely that Mary Grey would dare to move against the affianced husband of Olive Berrimeed? No; it would make a stir—it would hurt the family name. It was what he knew of Mrs. Berrimeed and the accusation he could level against Marshall, against the cheque and what she might discover. Sir Digby came to the conclusion that the odds were in his favour, providing that he acted at once; and while, on the one hand, determined to try and intercept any letter which might come from Mary Grey, on the other he was equally determined to speak to Olive at once. He had seen her with Marshall, and now she turned and came towards him with a smile on her lips.

“Ah, Sir Digby, so you are not going away, after all! Father will be delighted.”

“I trust that some other members of the family will share that delight,” he answered, and her reply came readily:

“Why, of course, we are all glad!”

“I thought that your brother was somewhat the reverse,” he said drily; and she replied hastily, anxious to remove any unpleasant feeling:

“Oh, you are wrong! Marshall is worried a good deal. I think it is business.”

“Not altogether,” he answered coolly. “Love has something to do with it.” Then, seeing her look of surprise, he went on calmly: “Oh, believe me, my dear young lady, I know of that little romance, and I sympathise with him, seeing that I myself have fallen a victim to the little, mischief-making deity, Dan Cupid.”

“Indeed?”

She coloured slightly; the man’s words were significant, and he smiled.

“Oh, yes! It is because of that that I take this opportunity of speaking with you alone——”

“With me, Sir Digby? I——”

“Yes, I know. You are surprised——”

“I mean,” she said quickly, “that your story cannot affect me.”

“You are wrong. It affects you highly, seeing that you are the lady who has stolen my heart.”

“Sir Digby,” she repeated, divided between amusement and indignation, “really, without wishing to be rude, this is absurd!”

“Pardon me, it is tragic! Do not go yet!” he added, as she turned, annoyed by his manner. “You see, this also affects your brother.”

“My brother? What do you mean?” She turned again as she spoke and regarded him questioningly. Something in his manner alarmed her; it seemed so quietly threatening.

“My dear young lady, it is not only love which troubles your brother. I happen to know that. Do you remember—it is not a nice subject to talk of to a lady, but you must pardon me—do you remember the mysterious murder of Margaret Hall, some short time back?”

“I do. It is not a thing to forget easily. But why do you mention that?”

“Do you remember that a certain mill-girl found some clue, the nature of which was never revealed—a clue which she handed to the police?”

“Certainly.”

“Now, do you also know that your brother possesses a very unique set of sleeve-links?”

She regarded him in silence for a few moments, horror and indignation

mingling in her glance. Then she said slowly, making a great effort to steady her voice:

"Sir Digby Rulph, you are my father's guest, and as such have a great claim upon us all; but you—you are hinting that my brother was mixed up in that murder."

"I have not yet hinted it, but you have guessed my meaning. The clue that girl found was a stone set with diamonds, which exactly matches the stones in those links. And, strange to say, one of the stones in the links does not match, but has manifestly been put in lately."

"Sir Digby Rulph, I will not listen to this."

"You must listen," he said calmly. "It means this. Your brother is troubled—well, why is best known to himself. But I know of this matter, and that London girl knows of it. I myself heard her accuse him of the crime."

"It is impossible, if she loves him——"

"Ah, he spoke of the love afterwards! And then she changed her tone. She may be trusted, she may not; but I know of it also, and I make no secret of it. I am going to use my knowledge for my own ends."

"And you call yourself a friend!" she cried scornfully.

"A man, if he is not first of all his own friend, is a fool, who will soon have no friends at all," he replied, unmoved by her scorn. "Now, Miss Berrimeed, you know your father's pride, and your mother's love for your brother. Even if the crime is not proved a trial must take place, and that alone means disgrace. I love you, and I want you for my wife. It makes no difference to me that you say you do not love me; it will make life all the more pleasant to have to court you after we are married. The price of my absolute silence is your hand—your solemn promise to be my wife."

Her face was white as death, and her eyes full of horror as she listened.

"I will not believe it," she murmured. And he shrugged his shoulders.

"The best thing I can advise is go and ask your brother if it is not true. I come to you first. If you are obstinate, I shall make my bargain with your father and mother. It will be hard for them, though, to have to choose between their son's honour and your heart."

"I will ask my brother," she said. And he nodded.

"Very well! I will come with you, if you like."

"You? No; I will not have your presence. I will see him alone."

"As you will. And if he confesses that this is true? The charge mind. I do not expect him to own to the crime."

"If he confesses it is true, I must think."

"Again, very good. I want to be reasonable."

He raised his hat, and she turned and went, a great fear in her heart. In some vague way she recognised that this man would never have made such an accusation as this unless he had good grounds to go upon. Her brother implicated in the murder of Margaret Hall! It was too horrible! It could not be true!

And Sir Digby Rulph stood looking after her. "Now," he said to himself, "I shall either win or I shall get kicked out. It is about a toss-up. Ah!"

The postman came up the walk, and he hurried towards him.

"I will take the letters in, my man. I expect there are some for me."

The man handed the delivery to him, and he glanced through them eagerly. Yes. One addressed to Marshall, in her handwriting. He knew it well enough, seeing that he had once imitated her signature. He slipped it into his pocket, and took the others in. Then, going to his room, he calmly opened it, and read it.

CHAPTER 23.

An Urgent Message.

SHE had won! She had succeeded! Fast as the train sped, it was all too slow for the impatient spirits of the triumphant girl. She had never hoped for such complete success as had been hers. Now, if only Stephen Redman had been able to trace the links, there was nothing to fear; but unless that was done, still the most important portion of the testimony would be lacking.

For, though she might prove that her relative, now known as Sir Digby Rulph, was one and the same with the Lord Bryant who had enticed away poor Bertha Medster; though she might prove that Bertha was his wife, and that little Kit was his son; though she might prove that he had given the child to Margaret Hall, and had the strongest motives for wishing her removed from his pathway, still, she could not prove that he had done this; she could not demonstrate that he had been in the place prior to the time when he came openly as Mr. Berrimeed's guest.

And, unless that could be proved, the question of who killed Margaret Hall must go unanswered, and the bare assertion that Marshall possessed the genuine links at a later date than that of the crime would be the only thing between him and, perhaps, a verdict of guilty.

She had done much in one way, but so far as clearing the man she loved went, she had accomplished nothing. Her hopes were centred upon the detective, and, though the train sped along close on sixty miles an hour, it seemed to her that it was the slowest journey that she had ever undertaken.

She sat gazing out at the flying landscape, and, in spite of her anxiety, a smile would come to her lips as she thought of Marshall, and wondered what he and his people would say when they knew the real story of Mary Grey, the poor London girl who had wandered into Berrimeed Mill to seek work as a humble minder.

They were nearing the end of the journey at last. Fields gave place to scattered houses; then the houses grew closer together. They dashed past long processions of chimney-pots, the clear air began to thicken with the great city's murk, and at last the train slowed down, with a long vista of roofs spreading on either hand, and the terminus was entered. The journey was over, and Mary Grey, too impatient to even think of her bodily fatigue—and she was beginning to get tired now, with this journeying here and there—called a cab, and drove straight to the detective's office. She had previously sent him a telegram, telling him that she was returning by this train, and hoping that he would be able to see her upon her arrival.

Mr. Redman did not disappoint her. He was in his office when she arrived, and, after a glance at her somewhat weary face, he insisted upon tea being sent for ere they settled down to business.

Mary was grateful for that tea. She certainly needed it. And while she sipped it she narrated her adventures, her companion listening with a smile of decided approval.

"I congratulate you," he said, when the story was done. "I do, honestly. It is no empty compliment, believe me. There are many professional detectives who would not have followed a clue so closely and patiently as you have done. It is just as I thought."

"But I have not proved anything yet in regard to the murder."

"You think not? You have proved motive, and that is a great thing. Suppose that we did not get beyond this? Sir Digby Rulph, as he calls himself, is called for a witness—he is ignorant of what we know. He is asked in examination whether he knew Margaret Hall, or ever heard of Lord

Bryant; and, of course, he denies both things. Then we produce our evidence; the man is confounded. Why, he would give himself away. It would produce such an effect that the jury would form their own opinion at once, and I would wager my professional reputation that it would be in favour of Mr. Berrimeed. Add to that the fact that this man persuaded Mr. Berrimeed to purchase the original links, and that he had them in his possession for some days; also, that he would have had the opportunity to change the real and the false after his arrival at Mr. Berrimeed's place, why, you have a case as strong as can be! A man has been hung upon less weighty evidence before now."

"You really think so?" she queried hopefully; and he answered:

"I do, indeed! But," he went on, "that is leaving out any facts which I may have been able to obtain——"

"You have discovered something, then?" she cried eagerly. "Ah, I can see you have! You would not look so contented if you had not."

"Especially when you, a novice, have done so well. I will not keep you in suspense, though I so admired your work that I almost forgot my own. In the first place, I have been spending money——"

"That I gave you full permission to do."

"I know. I have made a purchase. It will interest you, though it is an act for which I might be imprisoned myself. Indeed, I do not know but what I implicate you also."

"I hardly understand," she said doubtfully, and he laughed.

"Putting it plainly, I have been buying property which I well knew was stolen——"

"The links!" she cried, the light breaking in upon her. "You have actually discovered the links?"

For answer, the detective took a little case from his pocket and handed it to her; and there, when her trembling fingers touched the spring, were the original sleeve-links, which once had been worn by an emperor, reposing upon their bed of purple velvet.

"Oh, Mr. Redman, how grateful I am!" she cried. "How did you manage it?"

"My task was easy," he answered, smiling as he noted her pleasure. Apart from the satisfaction which it gave him to succeed with the case, he was delighted at being instrumental in serving her. "In the first place, there are very few people who would buy these links—I mean very few merchants. Of course, if they were being honestly disposed of by their owner, it would not be so difficult; though even then you might count the buyers of them upon your ten fingers. But when it comes to selling them quickly and quietly, the number is narrowed down. Our men were greedy. If they had taken them to a regular receiver of stolen property, they would not have got anything like so much for them; but we should have had great difficulty in tracing them. As it was, they went to a respectable buyer, thinking to dispose of them before anything was found out, and I began at the first of such merchants whom I knew of, and went the round, and tumbled at last upon the right one. Poor fellow! He looked blue when I told him that they were stolen property. I think it was as much the idea that his reputation would suffer, as the loss entailed; but I soon set his mind at rest, told him that no one would blame him, and paid him the price he gave for them."

"But even this, great as it is, does not settle things," Mary said slowly. "It proves that Marshall—I mean Mr. Berrimeed's"—how she blushed as she corrected herself!—"links were stolen; but it does not connect Lameer with the theft."

"Ah, that is where my real sphere of work begins!" laughed the detec-

tive. "You do not suppose that I was going to be satisfied with the mere recovery of the links, do you? I hope you have a better opinion of me than that," and he laughed again. "No, your ladyship; the next thing was to get our good friend to give me a description of the man who sold the links; not a very difficult task, because such an unusual transaction naturally stamped itself upon his mind. A Jewish gentleman, he said, and that was quite enough for me. Our friend Lameer had, amongst his familiars, a certain Jacob Arstein; they were connected in the old days of the music-hall business, and have kept in touch ever since, I think. I know of more than one shady transaction they have had together. It was Arstein, you remember, who managed to get that cheque of yours cashed."

She nodded without speaking; she was too interested for words, and he went on:

"Well, my next step was to visit the worthy Arstein. My word, you should have seen his face when I entered his office; it was too great for description. I rather fancy that there must be a goodly number of shady affairs he knows of, and he was not at all sure which of them I wanted him about."

"And did he confess?" she asked, almost impatient of the deliberate way in which the detective was speaking.

"Confess! He completely knuckled under, and declared that he did not know that they were stolen, that they were sent to him by his old friend Lameer, with instructions to dispose of them to the best advantage, and forward the money to Sir Digby Rulph."

"I suppose Lameer owes him money," he said plaintively, and he grovelled again when I hinted that he was aware that Lameer and Rulph were one and the same."

"Then the case is clear," she cried. And he smiled again.

"Oh, I have not done yet! I like finishing artistically when I begin. You see there are not many people in London who can make these imitation stones, and, though the paste is readily obtainable in all sorts of sizes, the onyx had to be made. I just went around to the makers, and soon had my man. He remembered making the imitation links perfectly—even showed me the entry in his books. As he said, he was perfectly innocent. It is by no means unusual for people to dispose of their jewels and wear imitation copies. He remembered the link coming back for another stone, and, as it was wanted hurriedly, he had to use one he had by him, which nearly matched."

"And it was Lameer who ordered these?" she asked, but he shook his head.

"Not a bit of it! He is too cunning for that. It was Arstein. I went back to his place, but he had taken fright and bolted."

"Oh," she cried, in dismay, "but he will be wanted!"

"Have no fear. He will be forthcoming when we require him. At this present moment one of my men is travelling with him as a boon companion. The moment we are ready for Arstein, he will be ready for us. My only fear is that he has sent warning to Lameer, in which case he is certain to bolt."

"But even then we can clear Mr. Berrimeed, and that is more to me than bringing the guilty man to be punished, though he deserves it. Mr. Redman, you have indeed done well, and put me under an obligation which no monetary payment can discharge. Now, you can act at once?"

"I think so. I shall go to the police and lay the facts before them. Of course, they will have to make the arrest."

Mary rose and held out her hand.

"I cannot thank you enough," she said heartily. "I will go now and get a little rest, for I am quite worn out."

"You must be!" he answered, and bowed her out.

But there was no rest for Mary. Upon her arrival at her home she found a telegram awaiting her. No one but Marshall knew of this address—at least, not anyone who would call her Mary Grey. Eagerly she tore the envelope open, and read:

"Urgent. Implore come evening express. Get out Chubbly. Wait old works. Last good-bye.—Marshall."

What did it mean? What could have happened? She could not understand, but she could not resist the appeal. That evening Mary Grey was speeding north again by the evening express.

CHAPTER 24.

"It is Her Life or Mine."

"MARSHALL!"

"Yes, Olive. Why, it is my turn now. What is the matter with you? You look quite upset!"

Marshall Berrimeed, when he had left Olive, sought the library, and thither his sister had followed him. But what had happened, that in so short a time the girl had so altered? She looked like one who had received a severe shock. He sprang up in genuine concern, but she motioned to him to resume his seat.

"Where are your links—the Emperor ones?" she asked, and then he understood. Sir Digby Rulph had betrayed him, in spite of his promises not to do so. For a little he did not answer, then he said quietly:

"What has Sir Digby Rulph been saying to you, Olive?"

"You do not answer me!" she cried. "Where are your links?"

"What has Sir Digby been saying? Will you tell me, or shall I go and ask him?"

"That you are implicated in the murder of that poor creature Margaret Hall. That a stone from your links was found in the room, and is now held by the police; that a new stone has been put in the link, which does not match."

"Ah! The first part of the statement is entirely false; the last part entirely true. But, Olive, surely you know me well enough not to think such things of me!" he went on gravely, and she replied:

"I know, Marshall. Of course, I know; but what can explain it? If this comes out, can you explain it?"

"I am afraid not," he answered; "but——"

"What would father say and feel, and mother? Sir Digby Rulph knows all about it. He heard that girl accuse you."

"Not a word against Mary!" he said quickly. "She did accuse me—at first; then, almost in the same breath, she cried that she was sure that I was not guilty. Olive, I own that I can understand Mary Grey as little as I can understand this matter. She has gone to London to find out something about the links; what, she did not tell me. But she more than hints that Sir Digby will be implicated. He was with me when the things were bought; he had them in his possession for some time. My real links have been stolen, and imitation ones placed in their stead."

"Where is she?" she cried; but he shook his head, and answered that he did not know. Mary had promised to write to him, but no word had come.

"And if she does not return—if she cannot find anything out?"

"Then the thing must be faced. I myself shall go to the police and

ask to see this stone. I am determined that the matter shall be investigated, even if it results in my being arrested upon suspicion."

"Marshall," she entreated, "do not act rashly. If you could not prove your innocence?"

"That is not the thing; it is for anyone to prove my guilt."

"It may be so from a legal standpoint, but not from a social. You know how people spoke of Tom Rhole, even after he was acquitted."

"Yes, Olive, the world is uncharitable," he admitted, and she went on:

"And if—if you were not acquitted? Oh, Marshall, can you think of no explanation?"

"Mary thinks——" he began; but she interrupted him impatiently.

"It is always Mary! You seem to look to her entirely. She has been the harbinger of ill-fortune from the first. The very night she came the murder was committed; she found the clue, she gave it to the police, she saw your links and accused you, so that anyone might hear her. Oh, forgive me, dear!" she added penitently, as she saw the look of displeasure upon his face. "I did not mean to pain you. But you put too much trust in this girl. You know absolutely nothing of her; she may be true, she may be only an adventuress."

"Please, Olive, let us talk no more of it," he answered, "or we shall quarrel for the first time. I have told you the whole story. I am unable to explain it, I own. Now, Sir Digby——"

"He will do nothing," she interrupted. "You need not think that——"

"He told you?"

"Yes. I was saying how troubled you were, and he told me what was troubling you. I would not believe it; I had to come and ask you. Marshall, answer me truly; if nothing can be found out, and this became known, might it not endanger you?"

"It might," he answered thoughtfully. "I certainly feel that if it was another man who was in my place I should be inclined to feel that he must in some way be implicated."

"Then, Marshall," she said impressively, "it must not be known; you must hold your peace, for father's sake and mother's."

"And have Sir Digby speak," he protested, but she answered:

"Sir Digby will not speak; of that I am sure."

"I am not. Indeed, I fancy it is most likely that he will."

"But I am sure," she persisted. "You may find a stronger prop to lean upon that Mary Grey, with all her half-promises."

"Olive, how bitterly you speak of her!"

"Let us leave her out, then. Promise me that you will not speak. If you do, you will spoil everything."

"No; I will not promise that," he answered. "If Mary Grey does not succeed in her task, whatever it is, I shall proclaim the truth—at first to our father, and then to the authorities."

"You will kill him!" she cried impatiently; and then the mill-owner came in himself.

"Now, Marshall, we must be off," he said. "Olive, you take care of Sir Digby until our return."

"Yes, dad," she replied; and then slowly, but determinedly, she went out to seek the man with whom she was to make such a dreadful bargain.

He was there lounging under the trees, a strange, set expression upon his face, and he lifted his hat with the most scrupulous politeness as she advanced.

"Well," he queried, "are you satisfied?"

"I have to apologise," she answered steadily, "for having expressed any

doubts as to the accuracy of your statement. Marshall tells me that what you have stated is a fact; but he also says that the links he now has are not his. In some strange way they have been changed for imitation ones."

"It would be difficult to prove that to the satisfaction of a jury," murmured Sir Digby. "Who would be likely to believe it?"

"That he is inclined to test," she answered. "He talks of at once making the facts public."

The man looked up quickly. If Marshall Berrimeed did that, then all that he had overheard would be profitless to him.

"Has he reflected upon the inevitable results of such a course?" he asked. "It will mean arrest and trial, and no man, even if he is found innocent, can stand that and have no mud stick. Someone will always be found ready to whisper that he was guilty. And if it goes against him, Miss Olive, the penalty for murder is hanging. Not a nice thing, is it?"—as he saw her shudder at the mention of that ominous word.

"You would advise him to keep silent?" she queried; and he smiled.

"Would you yourself not recommend such a course, providing always that there is no one—like myself, for instance—who might betray him? We must not forget that part of the bargain."

She paused. She was too inexperienced to see the weak points in the case. Her horror of any charge being levelled against her brother made her blind to the remoteness of the chance that he would be convicted. The danger was there, and she must avert it if she could.

Then came the thought of Mary Grey, the girl against whom she had spoken so bitterly. Marshall had said that she would be back shortly. Olive clutched at that, as a drowning man will clutch at a straw.

"Will you give me two or three days to consider this proposal, Sir Digby?" she asked. "It is one so very serious on all sides. It is whether I shall let my brother take his chance, or whether I shall purchase your silence by sacrificing myself. For it would be sacrifice," she added. "There would never be a thought of love. The man who can make such a proposal as you have done——"

"Is not a very ardent lover, you would say," he interrupted. "Ah, you mistake! It may be the very depths of love."

"I was not referring to love. I was going to say that the man who can make such a proposal, while enjoying the hospitality of the family, is a blackguard, and no lady can love one of that description."

"I am unfortunate in having earned such an opinion," he answered calmly; but his brows lowered, and his eyes gleamed with anger. "Well, we will not discuss it. I will wait for three days. I am going away now until to-morrow morning. I have a little business in Stockport which will detain me until it is too late to return. Au revoir, Miss Olive!"

"If ever I have you in my power you shall rue those words!" he muttered, as he turned away. "Bitterly shall you rue them! Two or three days, eh? They are waiting for her return! Curse her!"

He drew a letter, the one he had stolen, from his pocket, and read it again.

"Take courage," the message ran; "I am on the right track. I have found a clue. It may lead me to Scotland. I am not sure. I shall fix the guilt on the right shoulders, I feel sure. I shall be back in London, I expect, on Thursday afternoon, when I shall hope to have my work nearly done. If you desire to write to me, address the letter to Mary Grey, care of Lady Santon, Queen Anne's Mansions, Kensington."

She might be going to Scotland! What track had the girl got on? Scotland! If she had a real clue, and followed it there, she might learn a good deal. He knew the writer well; he knew her to be clever, and he feared. Going to Scotland! Now, what was he to do?

This turn of affairs he had not contemplated; it was serious, indeed. The only thing that seemed open was flight—flight, too, when he felt that with a little skill he might win; might force Olive Berrimeed into becoming his wife. And this girl was spoiling it all; and, worse than spoiling it, endangering him—making a rope for his neck, it might be.

A desperate man, a dangerous man and cunning, there was but one chance for him. Mary Grey would not talk of her discoveries, if she had made any, until she returned. She was not one to chatter. The secret would be safe until she arrived, and if she never arrived it would be safe for ever.

If she never arrived! To most men that "if" would have presented an insurmountable barrier, but not to this one. She had put one chance in his way, when she gave her address. No one would be supposed to know it but Marshall Berrimeed. If he sent a message—not a letter, for then the handwriting might betray him, but a telegram, timing it to get there just about the time she would arrive—she would think it came from Marshall. She would not question it, and she would not have time either to tell anyone anything or to write. She would set off at once, if he knew anything of her. Yes, it might be done; he might get her away; and then—then—— And he muttered to himself:

"It is her life or mine!"

Two stations nearer London the little village of Chubbly lay, a lonely little place. It was a wonder that they had ever made a station there. It was out on the moors almost, and close by it were the ruins of an old bleaching works, that, with other property, had become involved in a Chancery dispute, and was, meanwhile, being allowed to fall into decay.

A lovely spot this; just such a spot as a man might choose to hide in, if he were in danger of arrest. And there was no question about the girl knowing it, for all the workpeople knew "the haunted works," as they called them.

It could be done—it should be done! Sir Digby Rulph started ostensibly for Stockport, but ere he left he sent off a wire to London. It was a daring scheme, but daring schemes were most likely to succeed; and as he left the office he again muttered between his clenched teeth:

"It is her life or mine!"

CHAPTER 25.

In the Hands of the Enemy.

HE came slinking across the wild land after the darkness had fallen, as the fox slinks through the woodland, towards the farmyard, careful and watchful. Fools talked about this old place being haunted, but he had no fears; his nerves were of steel, and no thought of ghosts could make them quiver.

Had they been less strong, the thought of the crime which he was contemplating might have troubled him, but as it was he walked on unmoved.

A good, dark night! So much the better; it suited his purpose the more. He had laid his plans carefully, looking ahead to see that there was no possibility of a hitch. He was accustomed to plan carefully; he had been engaged in so many transactions where the slightest carelessness in details might have been fraught with serious consequences.

Dark and bleak the ruins of the old works appeared before him, the windows—or such of them as were left—thick with dirt, the tarred weather-board with which the walls were covered all dropping away from the supports.

Away on one side a little streamlet ran—a sluggish, filth-covered ditch,

which had never recovered from the vile chemicals which had flowed into it. Just the place for his purpose! He smiled as he surveyed it.

Away to the right a few lights shone, dimly marking the situation of the village, and above them, like two staring red eyes, the railway signals could be seen.

He stood watching them steadily until, suddenly and silently, the red became green. The night train was signalled. Mary would be in it; she would have changed from the express at Stockport and would be coming on by this one.

Yes, there away in the distance he caught the glow of the furnace as it was reflected upon the stream. He went into the mill building, and, producing a bullseye, he lit it, and then returned to the doorway and waited, silent, grim, expectant.

With grind of wheels beneath the brakes the train came to a standstill, and the few passengers for Chubbly alighted—one or two mill-hands, who had been visiting friends, and a girl—Mary Grey.

She looked around as if half expecting to see someone waiting for her; then, turning, walked out on to the moors, and turned her face in the direction of the old works.

How dreary and silent it was here! What could have happened that Marshall should have to come here in hiding? It could not be anything connected with the links. No; he would have remained and faced that. Was it—the thought made her turn cold—was it that he had quarrelled with Sir Digby? That was far more likely. Had he injured him in any way—killed him, perhaps—with some unlucky blow, and was so forced to flee?

The telegram said it was to bid her a last good-bye. Her heart sank at that prospect, for Mary Grey knew now, and did not attempt to disguise the knowledge, that she loved Marshall Berrimeed with all her heart.

She was to wait for him. Well, she did not mind that. Mary Grey was not of the nervous sort. The man who had enticed her here knew that, or he would not have made this dreary spot the meeting-place. She went on, and at last she reached the works and looked round.

The man had seen her coming, and he crouched there in the shadow like a wild beast waiting to spring.

No one here; neither sound nor sight. Mary Grey stood and glanced round, and a strange sense of uneasiness came to her. Surely Marshall would never have asked her to meet him here, and yet he, and he alone, knew where to send to her.

She walked a little way down the beaten track before the works, and then slowly back.

"What was that? She fancied she heard a stealthy footfall, and she turned. She caught the dark outline of a man's form, and then a heavy blow fell upon her head, and she sank down. She was conscious of someone bending over her. She was picked up and carried—carried into that deserted building and thrown helpless into one corner.

What was it? Alas! she did not need to ask. She had been betrayed; she had walked blindly into a trap, and she had little doubt as to who it was who held her in his power, or little hope of mercy at his hands.

The thought turned her sick; but worse, far worse, was that other thought—that her death would mean Marshall still being in this villain's power.

No; not that. She had told Mr. Redman, and he would follow things up. She was not helpless, after all.

A light flashed in her eyes—the light from a bullseye—and she sat up and spoke calmly.

"You have no need to flash that thing, Lameer. You might just open it, so that we can see a little."

A muttered oath, and then the sneering answer:

"You are cool, my dear Mary, very cool. Perhaps you will be warmer soon."

"Suppose you do as I say, and let us see each other's faces."

"I don't know there is any need to. I can see yours very well. Still, to oblige you——"

The lantern was opened, and the thin ray of light straggled out, only seeming to make the surrounding darkness seem more intense; and there, in that faint light, she saw the face of Sir Digby Rulph.

"Well, the tables are turned now," he said calmly. "I told you that when they were you need expect no mercy. You have interfered with my comfort far too much, and you would spoil my plans now. My dear Mary, a letter has one disadvantage—you are never quite certain that it will get into the hands of the one it is intended for. I happened to see you in the place a few days ago, and I watched you post that letter. As a consequence I kept my eyes open for its arrival, and managed to secure it. So you have been to Scotland, eh? Perhaps you have managed to find out a few facts that you did not think of before. It is a pity, because I cannot be sure how much you know, nor that you would hold your tongue. I am going to make certain of it, though."

The man meant to murder her. Despite her brave nature, the helpless girl turned faint as that flashed upon her. Here, where brute force alone could avail, she had no chance; and yet she strove to struggle to her feet.

But he gripped her roughly, and hurled her back; and then, producing a coil of rope, he bound hands and feet, and gagged her with her own handkerchief.

"There," he grinned, as he contemplated his handiwork, "now we can talk—or, rather, I can talk and you can listen, and that is all that is needed. Perhaps you wonder why I have gone to all this trouble; why I did not hit a little harder, or use a knife or pistol. Well, I don't want any more murder. It is an awkward thing; clues are left, as you know, and bodies cannot easily be disposed of. Oh, no! I am not going to murder you, Mary, my dear! I am going to leave you here as comfortably as can be wished. But there are any amount of shavings over there, and straw and refuse, and some old chemicals, too, and I am going to set light to them. This old place will burn like paper, and there will be no awkward discoveries made. The body of some unfortunate tramp will be found, if anything of you is left at all, and that will explain how the fire broke out. Ah, I see you do not like that!"

He laughed softly. There was not one grain of human pity in his nature; and she—Heaven help her!—she could not move hand or foot. She could not cry out, she could only lay there watching, with great fear-filled eyes, as he crept across the building and bent over a heap of rubbish.

Then—oh, was there no help?—a great tongue of flame shot up, and the smoke rolled away in a fantastic column. He ran across to another heap, and yet another—the first was fully alight now—then, his work done, he turned towards his helpless victim.

"There, that will about do! Now, good-bye, and a pleasant journey." And with that he rushed out and left her there—there alone, with that awful death creeping nearer and nearer.

And no one would ever know. Marshall would wonder what had become of her. He would grieve for her, but he would never know.

Perhaps that was as well, for he would have sorrowed still more did he dream of the fate that had been hers.

And that man would still come to his deserved end, for Stephen Redman knew all, and he would act promptly. He would connect her disappearance with the man, if no one else did.

Thoughts travelled quicker than lightning's flash. How horrible that fire glowed! How the tongues of flame seemed to shoot out towards her! If she could roll away towards the door, she might get on her feet then and manage to open it. The first part of the task was easy, but the latter was impossible—she could not rise without the use of her hands.

The air grew hot with the flames' breath; the sparks fell about her; but the smoke ascended, and the fact that she was prone on the floor prevented her from being suffocated.

She must try and think—she must be brave—something must be done. Presently people would notice the fire, and come, but—but it would be too late then, she—

A thought! If she could endure the pain! She rolled across towards the flame and deliberately held out her hands. Ah, how the fire scorched them! She could not endure that. She had hoped to burn the rope through; but it was impossible—the flame would seize her before it ate through that cord.

But that piece of smouldering timber which had fallen! Feverishly she rolled to it, and, drawing in her breath, she pressed those frail wrists down upon the hot, glowing wood.

It was agony—it was torture; but it was for freedom—for life itself! She strained at her wrists—the cord cut into them, but it gave—gave suddenly, and—her hands were free.

There were voices shouting outside now, but the place was a roar of flame. It curled nearer, nearer to her, as she sat there, plucking at the rope around her ankles. She would not be in time—she could not get it undone, and the place was rocking—she was losing her senses—she could not—she—

Hark, what was that—that voice? Surely she knew it—a strong voice, though ringing with agony now.

“Mary! Mary! Mary! Are you here?”

Marshall! Marshall was there outside! She tore away the covering over her mouth; she had let it remain as a smoke filter, but she tore it away now.

“Marshall! Marshall!” she shrieked. Alas! how could she hope to be heard? She was fainting; she could not endure; she could not even crawl to the door.

Down in a corner she crouched, the burning timbers falling around her. She put up her hands to protect her face, but they fell; they fell like lead. There was no help for her, and Marshall was outside—Marshall was—

What was that? A window had gone, and a face appeared. In a dreamy sort of way she recognised that someone was looking into the room, striving to peer through the smoke, and she wondered whether he would see her. She felt curious to wait and see; she did not think of calling him. It was not fair; he must find her.

The poor brain was deadened with the fatal fumes; a drowsy sense of weariness was creeping over her; the smoke was going to be merciful to her and take her from the torment of the fire.

But was it merciful, when help was so near, when Marshall was struggling in, groping for her amidst the fire?

Then a tongue of fire licked her with its awful, stinging kiss, and the pain aroused her. She sprang up, and a wild shriek burst from her lips, the last she could utter.

The last, but enough. The groping man had heard. He bounded across

the flaming furnace; he stopped and gripped her; and then, with clenched teeth and bent head, he dashed through the flame, and to the window through which he had entered.

Sir Digby Rulph was not to succeed, after all!

CHAPTER 26.

Just in Time.

IT had been a weary, trying day; work, generally a pleasure, had seemed quite burdensome to him, and he heaved a sigh of relief when at last he could lay it aside and return home.

And yet even going home brought its trial, for Sir Digby Rulph was there, and his presence was repugnant to Marshall Berrimeed.

All through the office hours he had been pondering over things, and had made up his mind that his best and wisest course was that of openly proclaiming the truth, in so far as he knew it. His very nature abhorred secrecy; it would be far better to let his father know of the difficult and mysterious circumstances in which he was placed—it was not as though he had done anything to contribute to the bringing about of those circumstances—and then go and see the police authorities.

To do that would be to rob Sir Digby of the power of making mischief, and he could also tell his father to what base uses their guest had threatened to turn his knowledge, and so reveal him in his true colours.

It was true both Olive and Mary had entreated him to hold his peace, the former saying that she knew that Sir Digby would not speak. How could she know? What power did she possess over this man? And Mary—how could she discover anything? Much as he loved Mary, great as his affection was for Olive, he felt that he was unwise in following their counsels. In open truth, and in that alone, his safety lay.

So reasoning with himself, Marshall determined upon having a private consultation with his father that very evening, only to find, when he arrived home, that man's proposals cannot always be followed. His father had gone off to visit a neighbour, and would not be home till late; the talk must be postponed until the next day.

There was no message from Mary; he had been looking forward to some letter, and no word had come. Surely she could not have failed him! She had promised to write and give him her address, and she had not done so; and he had heard one of the workmen at the mill declare that he had seen her in the locality only three days before. What had she been doing? Why had she come and gone without even a message? The questions could not be answered, and he felt weary of contemplating them. On every hand vexations and inexplicable problems seemed to present themselves, until faith and hope alike seemed to fail him.

But Olive was at home, and she looked so grave and strange, so unlike herself. It could not only be what he had told her about the links; surely she could not view that with such distress! He could have taken his oath, if need had existed, that she had been crying.

"Were there no letters for me, dear?" he asked her, as they sat down together; and she shook her head.

"No. Did you expect any in particular?"

"I hoped to have heard from Mary Grey," he answered; and she frowned. How he kept on about that strange girl! How he looked to her! Well, he would find that she, and not Mary Grey, was the one who would help him the best.

He had been watching her in silence for a little while, when he suddenly

rose, with grave, masterful air, and came over to her, putting his hand on her shoulder and gently forcing her to look up at him.

"Olive," he said, "I want to know what is the matter?"

"I—I—nothing——" she began, but he interrupted her.

"It is not like you to equivocate, Olive. Something is very wrong."

"Is there not enough to make me feel grave?" she asked "Your trouble about Mary Grey, and—about the links?"

"Wait a moment. You yourself said that I need not trouble about the links, because Sir Digby Rulph would not speak of them."

"Yes," she admitted, vainly seeking to escape his glance; and he continued:

"How do you know that? Come, little sister, I mean to be answered. If you cared for Sir Digby, and he for you, I could understand; but I know you do not do that. Now, tell me!"

"Sir Digby has given me his promise," she murmured; and he nodded.

"Quite so! At what price? I know him too well to imagine that he is disinterested. What was his price, Olive? It may be that I will not consent to that price being paid."

The look and the tone convinced her that Marshall was suspicious.

"Tell me, Olive," he said again. "If you will not, I shall take other means of finding out."

"Don't ask, Marshall!" she pleaded. "Let things rest as they are."

"Tell me, Olive!" he insisted, disregarding her entreaty.

And then she faltered out the truth, the price which Sir Digby had demanded, and which she had promised to pay, and he listened in silence, love for her devotion and indignation against this man mingling in his heart.

And when she finished amidst tears, he bent and kissed her fondly:

"You dear, devoted sister, willing to pay such a price for my safety!" he said. "But did you think that I would allow it?"

"What will you do, Marshall?" she cried, as he turned away; and he answered grimly:

"Go and find Sir Digby Rulph, and kick him out, let father say what he will."

She heaved a sigh of relief. She was glad Sir Digby was away, for her brother looked quite capable of keeping his word.

"It is a good thing for him," said Marshall, when she informed him that his enemy was absent. "Well, he won't come back again. I shall let father know when he returns."

"Oh, no, no, Marshall! Think what he will suffer!"

"Nonsense! Olive, you have let this man terrify you out of your usual calmness. If I was really guilty, you could not do more than you have done. I tell you, dear, that this man is a scoundrel; and the more I think, the more convinced I am that he knows the real solution of this—he is connected with it in some way. I ought to have spoken out at the first—yes, at the very moment when Mary Grey told me."

"Still Mary Grey, Marshall! She would not have done for you what I have been willing to do."

"Always Mary Grey, Olive," he replied. "Come, little sis, don't be jealous of her. The love I have for her does not diminish the love I have for you."

"She has brought trouble into your life—that is why I feel like that," murmured Olive; and he smiled.

"I do not think that she has. She has told me that she loves me, and that is a great deal. But there, dear, we will not talk of that yet. I

thank you from the bottom of my heart, but I am very glad that I made you tell me this. When father comes home——"

"Marshall," she exclaimed suddenly, "suppose that Sir Digby tells papa about you and Mary! He knows about it, remember."

"Then so much the better," he replied resolutely; but, for all his resolution, that question brought a fresh difficulty to him. If Sir Digby did that, how would his father take it?"

"It's no use worrying and meeting trouble half-way," he said to himself. "I must go one step at a time, making sure that it is a true and right one, and leaving all the future ones to Heaven's guidance."

He felt restless. His mother had accompanied her husband, and Olive had an appointment with a girl friend. Marshall put on his hat and went for a walk; it would be better outdoors than sitting moping alone.

He struck out for the hills—he preferred their solitude—and on the road he overtook a man, one he knew well, a respectable old fellow who had a grocer's shop at Gabbly Old End, and who was, moreover, the local postmaster there.

"Good-evening, Mr. Chopple," he said, as he reached his side. "A fine evening." And the old fellow nodded.

"Ay, it is gradely foine, Mestur Marshall. Are yo' goin' to Chubbly, ta-neet?"

"To Chubbly? Whatever makes you ask such a question? I had not even thought of it. I merely came out for a stroll. Why did you ask?"

"Aw thought yo' might be goin' theer."

"But why? Is there anything specially on at Chubbly?" asked Marshall; and the old man rubbed his head in some perplexity.

"Lewk heer, Mestur Marshall," he said. "Yo' know that a postmaster is na' supposed t' talk abaat things. Aw mean if a mon sends a telygram, say, Aw oughtn't to tell onybry."

"Of course not," replied Marshall, greatly wondering what the man could mean.

"Well, Aw'm a bit bothert. Aw doan't think yo' lewk ill."

"No; I am not ill."

"Happen yo' woan't be goin' away at aw?"

"Now, look here, Chopple," said Marshall quietly. "Just you tell me what you are driving at, for I confess that I don't know."

"Aw'm bothert by them regulations. But lewk heer. Aw'll ask yo' a question. Ha' yo' tow'd onybry to send a telygram fo' yo' to that London lass, Mary Grey, askin' her t' meet yo' at Chubbly ta-neet? That's a fair question, an' doan't breack na regulations."

Marshall stopped short, and gripped the man's arm.

"What do you mean?" he said sharply. "I have authorised no telegram of that sort. I do not even know where Mary Grey is."

"Aw knaw'd it!" cried the postmaster, smiting his hands together. "Aw wor sure o' it! Aw conna help regulations. Lewk at this heer!" And he pulled a form from his pocket, such as is used by the sender of a telegram for writing his message. "It wor this mornin', abaat twelve, a gentlemon came—Aw think he's stayin' wi' yo'—an' he sent off this message. Aw couldna think wor it meant, ony more than why he should come to Gabbly Owd End, 'stead o' goin' into th' town. 'That chap's a bad bobbin,' says Aw to myself; 'an' this telygram is a queer 'un. Aw'll tell Mestur Marshall o' this.' Bud then Aw thought o' th' regulations, an' Aw wor fair capt. Aw's been botherin' abaat it aw day lung."

Marshall read the words quickly. What did this mean? A message to Mary! How did Sir Digby—for that he was the sender Marshall had not

the slightest doubt—know her address, unless he had managed to intercept a letter? That would account for Mary's silence after her promise to write. And what did he want with her at deserted Chubbly? It looked serious. Sir Digby had gone off, telling Olive that he was going to Stockport, and here he was decoying Mary down. Did he mean her harm? Did he fear that she would find anything out concerning himself, and was he seeking to harm her? Chubbly! That was two stations down the line, close on half an hour's journey by train. But there was no train going, and it was nearly an hour and a half by road.

He looked at his watch. Half-past nine! The train was due at Chubbly about half-past ten. He would have time to do it.

"There is something wrong here," he said, "and you may have done more than you can tell by informing me."

"That's wor Aw thought. Aw said t' mysel' that if you' didna send th' telygram, then that chap wor tryin' to get th' lass daan wi' a lie; an' it wor a paand t' a toffee-dog that he wor oop to na good."

"Hold your tongue about this!" was Marshall's last word, as he started off at a run; and the old fellow nodded.

"Aw'll howd my tongue fo' sure. Aw doan't want to shout aat that Aw'se broken th' regulations."

Away he ran, through the darkness and silence. Hark! What was that? Ten striking! Ten! It could not be! His watch! He dragged it out and glanced at it. Why, it had stopped! Ten! And only half an hour for him!

He ran as he had never run before. His hat was gone, but he did not know it. He went straight on, over all obstacles; and at last, far away, he saw the lights of Chubbly, and—

What was that? That sudden upleaping of flame—that glow, like a blush upon the darkened cheek of night? A fire! A fire at old Chubbly, and—the old works! The old works, at which the wire had appointed Mary to meet him.

He saw it all. The villain had enticed the helpless girl there to murder her! His love was perishing! He flew on, his breath coming with gasping sobs. He burst through a little crowd of people who were standing watching the conflagration, wondering how it occurred, but doing nothing. Why should they trouble? After all, the old works were but a ruin, and they did not dream that any living soul was within them.

How they gaped when Marshall burst through them, crying out, in gasping tones:

"There is a woman in there!"

A woman! They thought him mad. How could there be a woman there, and how did he, a stranger, know it?

But he did not wait to be questioned. He flung himself against the door, but a rush of flame and smoke drove him, scorched and coughing, back. Oh, heavens! No living thing could pass that wall of fire. But the window—the fire seemed to be beating away from that. He dashed his fist through the rotten frame. He beat it out. He drew himself up, while the men, recovered from their surprise, and convinced now that something serious was the matter, rushed to his aid and supported him.

The place was full of flame. He could see nothing for the thick, black smoke. If his poor darling was there, she must have perished. Hope died, but love urged him on; and, unmindful of the deadly danger, he pushed his way through, stooping low, and calling her dear name.

No answer, nothing but the roar of the fire. If she was there he would at least save her body; that should not be given to the flames. And then, just when he was turning back in despair, there came that cry, the last

conscious sound wrung from the girl by the agony of the flame; and he heard, and turned.

He saw her now, a little huddled heap. He had her in his arms; he bent over her to protect her; and, staggering, blinded, fast losing his own powers of endurance, he struggled to the window.

The crowd outside, watching, awed, breathless, thinking that he had gone to his death, saw him appear there, framed in fire, and they rushed forward. One stalwart fellow sprang upon the backs of his companions, he reached out, he clasped the unconscious girl, and lowered her to his wondering and pity-filled companions; then he turned and gripped Marshall, just as he was swaying backwards.

One strong effort, and he had him through and in safety, just as, with a mighty crash and upshooting of flame and showering of sparks, the roof of the old works fell in.

Saved! Saved both! But only just in time.

CHAPTER 27.

Little Kit's Accusation.

HE had succeeded! He was safe now! There was no one who could come between him and his object!

He sat on a great rough stone, in the midst of the moorland stretch, and wiped the perspiration from his brow. The night was close, and yet he shivered. This was worse than the business with Margaret Hall, in one sense. He had no pity, no remorse, no weakness of that kind, and yet he shivered as he recalled the look in the girl's eyes as she lay there helpless.

Away in the distance he could see the glow of the fire. She would have died long before this. Most likely she was suffocated and never felt the flames.

He had succeeded. He could act without fear now. In addition to the accusation against Marshall, he could bring up the secret of Mrs. Berrimeed's past, if need be. It had only needed courage and resolution. Fools might have shrunk back, and so courted failure, but he was not of that sort. He had succeeded, and it served her right. All her life long she had stood in his way, spoiling his plans and hindering his desires. He sat there smoking; he did not dare to move yet. Presently he would get across to Stockport and make himself tidy, and then come back by the first train.

Sir Digby, careful, cautious, cunning, reviewed every step he was going to take; and at last, when the last faint reflection had vanished from the clouds, when the hush which only comes with the first hours of the day rested upon all things, he rose, and, walking rapidly, set forward towards his destination, taking care to give Chubbly a wide berth.

It was between five and six when he arrived at the place, and he waited in the station until the first train arrived. Then, as though he had come by it, he stepped across to the hotel, ordered breakfast, and indulged in a wash and brush-up, precisely as a man would who had been travelling all night.

Then, having taken his breakfast, he went to the station again and took a train back to Great Gabbly; and the first person he met, when he stepped from the station, was Samuel Berrimeed himself.

"Hallo! Back again safely!" the mill-owner cried, gripping his hand. "Olive told us that you had gone away on business for a short time. Nothing at all wrong, I hope?"

"Oh, no! I got a wire from one of my brokers; he sent it to the hotel,

you know." He had to put that in, since no telegram had come for him to Oakhurst Park. "He said that he was going to be in Stockport, and would like to see me. A rather lucky coup has cropped up."

"Good! My congratulations! By the way, there was some excitement away at Chubbly last night. You remember those old works I pointed out to you when we drove over?"

"Oh, yes, perfectly!"

"Well, they are burnt down."

"Burnt down! Why, I thought that they were empty."

"So they have been for years. A tramp, most likely. That was how one of my sheds got fired once; one of those ragged nuisances got in and set the place alight. That is the most likely thing. There is a rumour that a girl was in the place, and someone managed to get her out."

"What?"

Sir Digby stopped suddenly. Get her out! If Mary had been rescued, then things would be very serious indeed, and the best thing that he could do would be to make good his escape while opportunity lasted.

"Some girl," Samuel Berrimeed went on. "No one seems to quite know, though, and you know what queer tales these people make up. At any rate, if it is true, no one knows what became of the man or of the girl."

How would anyone know that a girl was there, unless this tale was true? Sir Digby felt decidedly anxious. It would not do to run away precipitately, but he must go some time that morning. If nothing occurred, he could come back. A girl saved! He bit his lips. Mary had always bested him. Was she going to do so now? Fool that he was, when he had the chance, not to have made absolutely certain, as he had done with Margaret Hall, when she threatened to betray him!

"Here," Samuel Berrimeed went on, "I am only going to be at the mill for about half an hour, and then we will go back together. You come on with me, there's a good fellow."

"I am awfully sorry, Mr. Berrimeed," he answered, "but I shall have to go away again for a little—not more than a few days at the most. It looks as though I was making a convenience of you."

"Nonsense! Never talk so," was the hearty answer. "Suit yourself in all things. You know that I am glad to have your company."

"You are kindness itself."

"Rubbish! Pleasure is on my side. Come on!"

They walked on together. If ever Sir Digby Rulph needed coolness, he did now. The girl saved! How could it be? She was tied, gagged, helpless, and no one had the least idea that she was there. Long before assistance could have come the place must have been a regular furnace, and Mary Grey but a shrivelled body. It was impossible that she could have been saved.

"Here we are again! Come on in!" And Samuel Berrimeed turned into the mill-yard, followed by his guest.

Mr. Dwite was in his office, hot, fluffy, surly as ever, and he grunted when Mr. Berrimeed put the question:

"Where is Mr. Marshall, Dwite? Is he in the mill?"

"I don't know where he is. Indeed, I don't think he has been in to-day. I have not seen him, and I wanted him, too. There were a lot of things to see to."

"Not been in to-day! Then where has he got to?" cried Mr. Berrimeed; and Mr. Dwite shrugged his shoulders.

"That is something I can't answer, sir. I don't know what has been

wrong with him lately, but he has been as glum and absent-minded as can be."

"I have thought so myself," the mill-owner confessed. "Well, well, it is no use wasting time! Let me look over the correspondence, and then you can get on. Anything special?"

"Yes, sir. Here is——"

And Mr. Dwite plunged into a long conversation in low tones, while Sir Digby, feeling that he was not wanted here, walked into the owner's office and seated himself.

Marshall away! Had Marshall's absence anything to do with the report of that girl being saved? Evidently nothing certain was known here, or else there would be a great deal more excitement. If they had known that it had been Mary Grey, everyone here would have been talking about it.

The probability, then, was that the story was false; and yet—yet—how had the rumour got about that a girl was there?

A man came in, bearing some samples of cops, and laid them on the desk.

"Beg pardon, sir. Aw didna knaw that awmbry wor here," he said, seeing the visitor; and Sir Digby nodded amicably.

"All right! By the way, have I not seen you before, somewhere?"

"Aw cannat say, sir. Aw've often been theer."

"Been where?" demanded Sir Digby; and the dry answer came:

"Somewhere!"

"You have a sharp tongue, my friend," he laughed. "What is your name?"

"Rhole, sir."

"Rhole—Rhole? Oh, yes; the young man who was accused of that murder, and got off by the aid of a girl named Mary Grey?"

"Quite right, sir!" answered Tom; and Sir Digby went on:

"And where is the girl now?"

"Meaning Mary Grey, sir?"

"Yes."

"Hoo's gone to Lunnon, sir." And with that Rhole hurried off, muttering to himself: "Yo' dirty tyke! Hoo wod be in the next world neow, if yo'd had yo'r will!"

But Tom did not go back to his work. Instead, he spoke a word to his foreman, stopped his machine, and hurried away in the direction of the Medsters' cottage, leaving Sir Digby to flatter himself that things must be right.

If Mary Grey had been rescued, she would have been sure to have told them who she was; and how she came to be in the old works, in which case it would have been known all over the place long before this. The very fact that no one knew anything confirmed him in the opinion that his victim must have perished, and that the rumour of rescue was one devoid of foundation.

"It is the last risk that I have got to face," he mused, "and I will do it. To clear off now might be to ruin everything. She must be dead. Perhaps they found the body. No one could possibly have lived in that place long after I left. I will risk it, unless I hear anything more."

And then in came Samuel Berrimeed.

"So sorry to seem inhospitable, Sir Digby; but Marshall does not appear to have been in this morning, and I have all his work to do, as well as my own. Go and smoke a cigar in the yard. I shall not be long. I would say smoke here, only it is one of our rules that there shall be no smoking on the premises, and neither Marshall nor myself, nor old Dwite, who likes his pipe as well as any man going, ever thinks of breaking it. If we did,

the hands might follow our example, and a fire here would be ugly, apart from stopping work for some time."

"Of course! Of course!" Sir Digby answered. "Well, I will do as you say. Do not let me interrupt you; I can go back by myself if you prefer it."

"No, no! I shall not be long, and then we will go together. I shall 'phone through for the carriage."

So Sir Digby went into the yard, cigar in mouth, and strolled to and fro, until he became conscious that several loungers there were regarding him with strange glances. He was quick to take alarm, and he noticed them carefully. Yes, they certainly were watching him! They whispered to each other as he passed. Something was wrong, then. They knew something. Perhaps Berrimeed himself knew; perhaps—

He turned towards the gate, a sudden impulse seizing him that he must clear off at once; but a man entered, the young man Rhole, and behind him another man. Ah, he knew that other man! He hoped that he would not, in turn, recognise him. And behind the men came a girl, carrying a little child. He—he—

It was his own child! A sudden terror seized him. He turned to go into the mill again, but before he could do so they were between him and the entrance, and he had to turn haughtily and demand what they meant by their impudence.

And thus it came to pass that he found himself directly before the girl—a very pale-faced girl—and the little child; and the girl said softly, as if repeating a lesson:

"Look at the gentleman, Kit."

Ah, he saw now! He understood what it meant. The little eyes filled with terror, the little hands clutched the girl's neck tightly, and a shrill little voice cried:

"Kit's 'fwaid! Kit's 'fwaid! It's the naughty man who beat Aunt Margy!"

CHAPTER 28.

The Medsters' Lodger Returns.

"WHAT the ferrups is that?"

John Medster sat up in bed and listened. He might well be surprised, though it did not take much to tell what it was that had roused him from his sleep.

Someone had knocked at the front door, and with a vigour which bespoke determination, and no qualms as to whether the whole house was aroused or not.

"Feythur!" shouted Dick, from the room which he shared with his brother, "theer's sumbry knocking at th' door!"

"Aw'd be deaf if aw couldna yer it!" growled John, scrambling up, as from the girl's room came the cry: "Feyther, aw yo' awake?"

"Awake!" grumbled the irate John, as another knock came. "By gum, is th' haase on feire, or wot? Naa then, wot is it?" And he opened the window and stuck his head out, as he shouted the angry question.

"Do you want to wake th' whole street, or—— Well, Am'm capt!"

For a voice had answered him, a voice he knew full well, and he saw a man standing there with a woman in his arms.

"Come down quick, Medster, and let me in! I have Mary Grey! Someone has tried to murder her, and she is hurt. I have brought her here."

"Heer, get oop, owd girl!" he said to his wife, who had remained trembling with alarm. "It's Mestur Marshall has browt Mary back. Hoo's hurt, he says. Aw'll goo daan an' let him in."

The house was aroused now, and everyone was dressing in haste, and John himself, candle in hand, went down and opened the door.

"Bring her in heer, sir," he said. "Wot's th' lumber, and—— Good Lord, wot's th' matter wi' your face and wi' th' lass? Tha's been in foire? Tha's burnt, sir!"

"Never mind me," answered Marshall hastily. "I shall be all right. Let me have a light to see if she is badly burnt. I dare not take her to my house. I will explain afterwards. That is better"—as the man brought a lamp.

Then he groaned as he looked on the fair face with the ugly burn and the beautiful hair all burnt away.

"Yo' quiten thyself, sir," said John. "Heer's th' missis! Hoo's rare and fine at burns an' such loike. Aw'll just carry th' lass oop to her room, an' then th' missis can see wor's amiss."

But before John could move Marshall had gathered the precious burden in his arms, and bore her along, merely saying, "Show me the way. I will take her."

"Bring her i' heer, sir," directed Mrs. Medster, opening the door of the little room which had been Mary's own. "Now, Kittie, yo' stay wi' me. John, yo' take Mestur Marshall down wi' yo', an' Aw'll sewn tell yo' if th' lass is badly hurt. Yo' childer, goo back to your beds, or else daan into th' kitchen."

So, with the calm air of a general directing his forces, did Mrs. Medster dispose of the household, and when she and Kitty were alone she undressed the girl and put her to bed.

Kitty bewailed, as she saw the beautiful hair fall away in masses; but, as her mother said: "Hair will grow ageean."

"Aw dunna understand it a bit!" the woman said. "Hoo's been scorched abaat th' face an' arms, but hoo's noan hurt else. Tha get th' oil an' some rag, Kitty. Hey! Hoo's comin' raand!"—for Mary uttered a moan and shivered.

Downstairs John Medster sat open-mouthed, and listened to his visitor's story.

"It's a mystery to me," Marshall said. "I had not the least idea that she was in the neighbourhood. Thank God that I met old Chopple! And here is your wife."

He started up as Mrs. Medster entered, and the anxious query came:

"Well, is she much hurt?"

"Na, sir. Hoo's gotten scorched, an' her face will smart, and perhaps her arms 'ull be bad blistered. And her hair is aw burnt. But hoo's not hurt much. Aw's dressed her wi' oil, an' we con ha' th' doctor see her in th' morning, bud—— Hey, goodniss sakes, you are burnt, sir! Heer, Kitty, bring more rags an' th' oil!"

"There is no need," began Marshall.

But Mrs. Medster insisted.

"Yo' can tak' it off, sir, when yo' gets whoam, bud yo' let me cover them burns. How did it aw happen? Aw never wor so capt, not in aw my life."

"It's a big lumber, an' theer's some big rascal in th' world," put in her husband. "Heer was Mestur Marshall taking a walk, an' never thinkin' of onythin' when he meets owd Chopple fro' Gabbly Owd End, and Chopple towed him that sombry had sent a telegram to Mary Grey in his name, askin' her to coam fro' Lonnon by th' next train, an' meet him away at th' owd warks at Chubby. So Mestur Marshall goos on, an' finds th' place all alight, an' Mary tied hand an' foot, an' left theer to be burnt."

Exclamations of wonder followed this speech, and all the time Mrs.

Medster was deftly covering Marshall's injuries with oil, a thing for which he was thankful, despite his protests, for the pain and smarting was beginning to grow very severe.

"Muther," said Kitty, entering, "Mary hoo be wakened naa, an' hoo wanted to know how hoo got heer, an' when aw tow'd her, hoo wanted to know how Mestur Marshall wor, an' hoo wants to see yo' aw, an' talk to yo' aw. Hoo says hoo has got a lot to say."

"Hoo mun wait tin th' mornin', then," began Mrs. Medster decisively; but then she uttered an exclamation of protest, for there was Mary, her face wrapped in bandages, her dressing-gown, a thing which had always been a wonder and admiration to the Medsters, wrapped around her.

"I must talk, Mrs. Medster," she said. "I have something so important to say. Please let me come down, or you all come up."

"Wrap th' blanket raand yo', lass. My word! Aw'll leet th' fire, an' get a cup of tea. Aw jalouse theer's na moar goin' t' bed fo' ony o' us ta-neet."

"I am afraid that I am putting you to a lot of trouble," said Marshall; "but there was nowhere for us to stay over at Chubbly, and no doctor, and so I got a man to drive us over in a cart. Mary had fainted, and I was so anxious."

"An' where should yo' bring her if noan heer?" asked Mrs. Medster. "Aw am reet glad to have her back."

And then Mary came down, and when she saw Marshall, all burnt as she was, she uttered a cry of dismay, sweeter than the sweetest of music to him. It told him so much.

"Oh, are you hurt? I remember nothing after seeing you at the window! You have been injured?"

"Nothing to speak of," he answered; and he seated her in the armchair, taking care to remain next to her. "I was only just in time, Mary. Now, tell me how you came to be there."

And when she told her story, and described how she had been lured there and left to perish, how horrified and indignant they were, and how John Medster cried out that if he came across Sir Digby Rulph he would break his neck for him!

"No, no, my good friend!" said Marshall, with a grave smile. "Gracious, how it hurts to smile now! There is better punishment for him than that. But now, Mary, what about your story? You do not know," he added, turning to the others, for he would have no more concealment now, "that I have been accused, just as Tom Rhole was, of having murdered Margaret Hall?"

"Well," gasped John Medster slowly, "Aw've been capt ta-neet, but that bangs Banager!"

"But it is true, and it was because of that Mary here went to London."

"You must let me tell my story in my own way," Mary interrupted. "I want to tell it now, because if I was ill— Oh, I do not say that I shall be!"—as Marshall started. "Only I want you to hear it now. And it concerns Mrs. Medster, too."

"Eh?" said Mrs. Medster. "Wot—me?"

"Yes," said Mary. "Now, you would never have thought that the murder of Margaret Hall was in any way connected with your dead daughter Bertha?"

"Margaret's death wi' Bertha!" gasped John Medster, while his wife cried:

"That's why yo' came daan an' saw me, Mary. Mary came daan"—in answer to her husband's look of inquiry—"but hoo asked me not to tell awnbry."

"That was why I came down," Mary admitted. "Now I have got a bit of news for you, which may comfort you. In the first place, I can tell you, beyond any question of doubt, that Bertha was the wife of the man who took her away."

"The wife! Hoo wor really marriety!" cried Mrs. Medster, clasping her hands. "Oh, my dear, my hert's reet full oop naa! Tha's taken a load away. My Bertha was marriety!"

"Yes, she was married," continued Mary slowly. "And she had a little son."

"Ay—he died! Happen it wor th' Lord's mercy to tak' him."

"He did not die, Mrs. Medster," said Mary softly. "He is alive now."

"Wot?" cried John Medster huskily. "Aar Bertha's bairn alive naa? We—— Where is he? We mun ha' him to tak' care of."

"You are taking care of him," was the answer. "Cannot you understand? He is upstairs sleeping with Charlie."

"Little Kit," the woman said—"little Kit; him wot Aw said wor like aar Bertha? Are you sewer, Mary lass?"

"Quite sure," she answered. "The man took the child, and gave it to Margaret Hall to keep. Every word that I say can be proved, and I suppose that Margaret Hall threatened to tell the truth. The man wanted to marry someone else."

"And that man was Sir Digby Rulph," put in Marshall slowly. "I see it now. He wanted to marry my sister. That was to be the price of his silence." And Mary nodded.

Mrs. Medster had stolen away to look at little sleeping Kit. She did not love her own little Charlie a whit the less, but she loved the other little one the more, with a new love, for this was her Bertha's child.

And then Mary told Marshall of how, step by step, she had traced the mystery out; and she told him how she had the original links quite safely in London, and how Stephen Redman was already communicating with the police, and giving all the information necessary. And Marshall listened, holding the little hand, which made no effort to free itself, and looking at the dear face, or as much of it as he could see for bandages, with eyes full of love.

It did not matter to him now that he was in the cottage of one of the workers. After the events of that night the secret could be kept no longer. For good or ill, he would tell his father the truth; and then, if Mary would come to him, well and good; if not, he would wait, though it might be waiting for a lifetime.

And then, at last, all explanations having been made, Mary dropped her head, and said that it ached; and thereupon Mrs. Medster carried her off, declaring that she must go to bed, and stay there nice and quiet for a time. And Marshall bent forward and kissed—Kitty could have shrieked with delight as she looked on—he actually kissed Mary, and she did not make any attempt to escape it.

"God bless you, my love," he whispered softly, "and thanks be to Him that you are safe!"

Then he turned to John Medster, and held out his hand.

"Thank you for all your kindness," he said. And as the grey dawn caught the first blush of the sunrise from the east, he walked away down the silent street.

"Isna it rare and foine?" cried Kitty, in delight. And her father looked at her without answering for a little while.

"He kissed her," explained Kitty; and he nodded.

"Ay, lass! Aw's been rare capt this neet ower a lot o' things; bud he kissed her, an' that caps aw."

CHAPTER 29.

The Last Road.

" 'T'S the naughty man who beat Aunt Margy."

The man, guilt-hardened as he was, shrank back from that childish accusation, as he might not have done from that of any man living.

It was something so terrible. And this was his own child, the child who had never known a mother's love nor a father's care—the child who had been there in that cottage on that fatal evening when he had silenced for ever the woman who had threatened to spoil his plans.

He had taken no notice of its presence. A little creature like that could not betray him, he had thought; and, besides, it was his own flesh and blood. And now—now that same flesh and blood arose to point an accusing finger at him, and to proclaim before these people his guilt.

Little wonder that for the moment he was dumbfounded. He had put this so far behind him; it was the other business which he had been nervous about.

He stood there, staring from one to the other, and then with a strong effort he recovered his presence of mind. He was in a tight corner now, and it would need all his assurance and nerve to extricate himself.

"What does this nonsense mean?" he exclaimed, in angry tones. "Stand out of my way!"

But Tom Rhole and John Medster did not budge.

"Yo' stand still!" came the stern retort. "Theer's got to be sum questions put an' answered before yo' go away."

"You impudent rascal!"

Sir Digby turned sharply towards John Medster, for it was the latter who had spoken, and several men were gathering round. Whichever way he glanced he met scowling faces, and his heart sank. Mob vengeance was more to be dreaded than the law's verdict, and if these men were roused that might follow."

"Aw may be an impident rascal," the calm voice of the spinner was replying—"happen ony mon whoa speaks his moind to a gentleman is impident; bud, fo' aw that, Aw'm goin' t' speak. Happen, naa, yo' never yerred o' amnbry cawed Lord Bryant, eh?"

So they had found it out—the connection between himself and the past! What a fool he had been to risk it by coming here! He had hoped that the family would have gone, or that if they had not they would never have known. He had been careful in the past not to be seen by any of them.

"I never heard of anyone of that name," he answered boldly. "You are behaving very strangely, my man. I suppose you have a reason for it."

"Ay, Aw'se a reason, reet enuff. So yo' doan't knaw Lord Bryant? Ah, he wor a bad un! He got my lass Bertha away an' deserted her in Lunnon. Ay, an' took her babe fro' her fo' Marg'ret Hall to keep."

How did they know it? He had been too late! Evidently Mary Grey had got to the bottom of his secret, and had proclaimed the truth; and he was face to face with greater danger now than he had known before.

"That is all very sad, perhaps, but it is nothing to do with me," he said, turning. "Now, please stand aside and allow me to pass."

"Yo' stand still, mon, or theer'll be trouble," came the answer. "Aw say that this Lord Bryant did that, and then he come heer and killed Margaret Hall. And now this little felly says that the man who did that is yo'. Theer's got to be sum inquiry into this heer business, mestur, an' that's aw abaat it."

"You talk foolishly. A little child happens to say, in its innocence, that it knows me. Little children make mistakes. Is that all you have to go

upon? I am a friend of Mr. Berrimeed, and if you persist in this absurd conduct I must appeal to him."

"Appeal to whoa yo' loike—to th' owd boy, th' master, if tha wull, yo' scoundrel!" And as he spoke John Medster strode up to the man and gripped his arm. "Yo' scoundrel, yo' took my lass away an' betrayed her! Yo' took her child from her, and yo' killed Margaret Hall!"

His fingers closed with a passionate grip as he spoke. Sir Digby was a strong man, but he seemed powerless; the spinner forced him to his knees.

"Aw could strangle thee," he said—"Aw could kill thee! Mony's th' toime Aw've said that if Aw could find th' chap whoa did that Aw would take payment fo' it; an' naa Aw've found him! Bud theer's oathers whoa want thee, an' so Aw conna do as Aw wod loike to. Ger oop, tha dirty tyke! Tha's noan good enuff fo' an honest mon to soil his hands with!"

He flung him away, as if distrusting his ability to keep from taking vengeance upon him; and at that moment Samuel Berrimeed appeared at the doorway.

"Are you ready, Sir Dig—" he began; then he stopped, transfixed, as his wondering eyes took in the scene before him. Sir Digby lay half prostrate, and over him stood John Medster, one of his own workers; whilst an angry cluster of men gathered near, with threatening words and gestures.

"What does this mean? Are you men mad?" Samuel Berrimeed strode forward as he spoke, his every feature expressive of indignation. "How dare you treat a gentleman like this? You, Medster! I am surprised. Have you taken leave of your senses, or are you drunk? I will discharge every man who has taken part in this business! Rise, my dear Sir Digby, and accept my most profuse apologies that such an outrage should have been perpetrated upon my premises. Now, you fellows, clear off!" he went on; but, to his surprise, his hands refused to obey. There was nothing of the alarm which he would have looked for; on the contrary, they stood their ground boldly.

"You, Medster, explain this to me!" he said, singling John out; and John Medster answered:

"Ask him wot's become o' Mary Grey!"

"Confound Mary Grey!" shouted Samuel Berrimeed. "I can hear nothing but her name! The pousement"—in his anger he fell back on the old dialect—"has gone, and I will take good care that she never comes back again!"

"Happen hoo won't want to, sir," answered John Medster boldly. "Well, if yo' doan't want to ask him that, ask him whoa took away my poor lass Bertha."

"My good man, are you mad? Sir Digby Rulph was never in the place until he came as my guest!"

"Say yo' doan't know, sir," replied John. "Ask him wot became o' my Bertha's child; and wot child it was that Marg'ret Hall had wi' her! Ask him whoa killed Marg'ret Hall; an' if he says he doan't know, then tell him he is a liar!"

"What—what are you talking about?"

Samuel Berrimeed stared from one to the other of the men. This was evidently no light matter—they were all in earnest.

"Wot am Aw talkin' abaat?" repeated John. "Aw'm talkin' abaat murder, sir! An' Aw'm sayin' that yond mon's a murderer; an' Aw'm goin' to keep an eye on him until th' police comes!"

Sir Digby heard it in dismay. The police! Had they already sent for the police? If that were so, he need bestir himself indeed; and here he

was standing like some guilty fool, when boldness and courage were essential.

"Mr. Berrimeed," he said, turning to the mill-owner, "I must suppose that this man thinks he has grounds for the absurd statement which he is making, though his only grounds, so far as I know, is that this child appears afraid of me—a not unusual thing with children when they are near strangers. You know me, and of course I do not place any blame upon you for this outrage; only now I must insist that it ceases. If this fellow wishes to present any charge against me, there is a fit and proper way to do it. This is not the proper way, and I cannot tolerate it. Now, stand aside my men, and let me pass, without further trouble."

Some of them complied—they could not withstand the boldness of tone and bearing, coupled with the fact of their employer's presence; but others, and foremost amongst them Tom Rhole and John Medster, declined to budge.

"Tha are na' goin' tin th' police comes! They woan't be lung, Aw con tell tha!" said Medster. "Stay still, or happen yo'll be sorry fo' it!"

"John Medster, stand aside from that doorway!" Stern and determined, Samuel Berrimeed advanced as he spoke. "If there is a grain of truth in the wild story you tell, it can be investigated properly. This is not the way to behave."

"Ay, Aw'll stand aside noa, sir," said John coolly, as he glanced along the road outside. "Th' police are heer naa, an' it's noather me nor yo' wot's got to decide things."

The police here! Samuel Berrimeed was absolutely bewildered. The police here! This looked really serious. Who had sent for the police—on what authority had it been done? He glanced across at his guest; Sir Digby looked livid with passion and fear. He looked like some animal hunted to its lair, and at bay. He looked guilty! Samuel Berrimeed was a shrewd man in many things, and he did not like that look. He stood still; and suddenly Sir Digby started forward, hurled John Medster aside, and made a bolt for it. But Tom Rhole was there, and he was ready. He darted across, stuck out one foot, tripped the man, and sent him falling violently; and then in came an inspector and two constables and seized the prostrate man.

What was this they said?

"Edward Lameer, you are arrested for the murder of Margaret Hall."

The man on the ground heard it, and glared savagely. Lameer! It was that cursed girl's doing, then! It was Mary Grey, as she called herself! Unless she had been in it they would not have got that name.

"It is a lie," he shouted—"an absurd lie! I was not down here until after the murder! It's a plot to screen the guilty man!"

"You know the guilty man?" faltered Samuel Berrimeed, clinging to this hope that his former friend was innocent; and the prisoner turned to him furiously.

"Know him? Of course I know him! What clue is it which the girl Mary Grey gave to the police? A stone from a sleeve-link—from the links belonging to your son! The girl is missing now. He got her to go away, that she might not give evidence against him. Let the police have those links, and compare the stones with the one they have. They will find one in the links does not match the others. I know, for I heard your son and that girl talking about it. Ask your daughter why she promised to be my wife."

"What are you talking of?" said the mill-owner, amazed at this sudden turn: but the inspector nodded to his men.

"It is no use making a scene," he said—"it will do you no good. I hold a warrant for your arrest, and you must come quietly."

"I will come," was the sullen reply; "but I say this is a got-up thing. Where is Marshall Berrimeed?"

"Here I am!"

Quiet, unmoved, Marshall Berrimeed entered—Marshall, the same, but different. His hair was gone, his eyebrows destroyed, and a great crimson stain on one side of the face told of the fierce, scorching heat in which he had been.

His father uttered a cry of surprise, the arrested man a curse—he understood those signs well enough. The story of the rescue from the old works was no fiction. His victim had escaped, and, of all men, it was Marshall Berrimeed who had rescued her!

Sir Digby, like many of his class, was a fatalist. He accepted the sign. The girl had always beaten him; and now, when he had taken the most careful precautions, and laid all his plans so cunningly, she had escaped, and her lover had saved her. He shrugged his shoulders and laughed bitterly.

"It's checkmate," he said. "There is no use in fighting against fate. I won't say anything, inspector. Whatever you want to prove, you will have to prove. You——"

His words were cut short; for the men in the yard, seemingly irritated beyond endurance by the sight of Marshall's face, uttered angry cries, and advanced threateningly.

"Inspector, keep these animals off," the prisoner said; and the inspector threw himself between him and the men.

"Now, my lads, no nonsense of that kind!" he shouted.

"The first man who commits any act of violence leaves this mill!" added Marshall; and at that they drew back.

"Three cheers for Mestur Marshall!" cried someone. "And three cheers for Mary Grey!"

A burst of wild cheering followed, and amidst that sound Edward Lameer, the man who all his life had schemed and plotted and who had been so nearly successful, was led away. It was more bitter to hear that than to be a prisoner. Marshall and Mary Grey had won; he had lost. For them happiness and joy were dawning; for him the sun was setting, and night coming near, and in the gloom and darkness one darker shadow seemed to rise, awful and threatening—the shadow of the scaffold.

He knew it lay before him. He knew there was no avoiding it, save by one road, and that a dark one to travel.

But all his life he had fought, and all his life he had cheated, and he would cheat justice now. They had caught him, but they should not have the satisfaction of punishing him.

That night Edward Lameer, once known as the gay Sir Digby Rulph, set forth on that dark journey alone, and when the warders came to his cell in the early morning they found him lying there—dead.

CHAPTER 30.

Confessions.

THEY had arrested the man—the man whom he had treated as an honoured guest; and his very mill-hands were groaning, and pelting the prisoner.

Samuel Berrimeed stood for a short space, too bewildered for speech—hardly able to comprehend. He felt humiliated. To think that

he should have been so deceived—he, who had always considered himself as the embodiment of North Country shrewdness!

But, then, the significance of the men's cheers burst upon him, and his face became red with anger. What did they mean, these common work-people, by linking his son's name with that of this London girl?

He turned sharply, as if stung to action, and beckoned to his son to go home.

"Come with me," he said, and strode away; and Marshall, grave as ever, and in one sense as vexed as was his father, entered the carriage.

"Just tell me all about it." Samuel Berrimeed was schooling himself to being vexed. After all, he could not be more annoyed than he was now.

"It is a rather complicated story," answered Marshall. "To speak of the matter of the fire—though that is but one link in a longer chain of events—a girl was bound hand and foot, and left gagged in the old works, which had been deliberately fired. I heard of it by the merest chance, and was, by God's mercy, in time to rescue her."

"A girl left bound and gagged, to be burnt! What inhuman monster could do such a thing?"

"Your guest, Sir Digby Rulph," answered the son; and Samuel Berrimeed sat back and stared, too horrified for words.

"Who was the girl, and why should he do this?" he asked at last; and then he frowned darkly as Marshall answered the question.

"She was Mary Grey; and he did it because she, by her brave endeavours, had traced the murder of Margaret Hall to its source, and had freed me from the imputation of being guilty."

"You! You accused of being guilty of that woman's death? I am more and more astounded."

"Not more astounded than I was, sir, when I found myself confronted with the charge; and let me say, father, that I might have found a very great deal of difficulty in disproving it."

"But—but——" commenced the mill-owner, and then the carriage drew up at the door and they alighted.

Mrs. Berrimeed and Olive were awaiting them.

"What is it about Sir Digby Rulph?" faltered his wife. "We heard a rumour that——"

"Trust rumour to fly," answered Samuel Berrimeed. "It means, my dear, that I have been deceived. That I, who thought myself so clever, have been taken in. The man was a scamp. A scamp—an inhuman monster! He is arrested for the murder of that woman Hall, and——"

So they went in; and, seated there, Marshall began his story with the time when Sir Digby had come to him telling him of the sleeve-links being for sale, and tracing it along to Mary Grey's accusation, and subsequent suspicion, that Sir Digby Rulph was probably the guilty person.

"She promised me that she would go to London and instigate inquiries," he explained.

"Really, this extraordinary young person seems qualified for being head of the Criminal Investigation Department," was the mill-owner's somewhat caustic comment. "But go on."

"She kept her word, sir," Marshall continued, "but she found out far more than ever I looked for. The man's real name is Lameer, and he has been, by turns, forger, music-hall proprietor and performer, cheat, and society swindler. He it was who, posing as Lord Bryant, stole John Medster's girl away. He deserted the poor girl, and gave her child into the keeping of Margaret Hall, who appears to have been another of his victims. As regards the links, it seems that his idea was to get hold of them by substituting a pair of worthless imitations. The woman Hall interfered

with his plans, and he seems to have deliberately accomplished her death. Then he lost the stone from the link, which Mary Grey found and gave to the police; and he then went back to London and had another stone put in. That he did manage to get my links, and place the others in their stead, is certain; and you imagine my dismay when I found the change had been made, and that such a remarkable piece of evidence against my innocence existed."

Then he went on to explain the villainous proposition made to Olive; and at that the mill-owner's face grew very dark.

"You would not have allowed your sister to sacrifice herself, surely?" he said; and Olive answered before her brother could speak.

"He utterly refused to do so, father. I wanted him to, because I—I thought of you and of mother."

"Happy is the man who has such a daughter!" murmured Samuel Berrimeed.

And then Marshall continued, and explained how Mary Grey was enticed down to the old works; and at the end of the story Samuel Berrimeed took a pinch of snuff, and remarked drily:

"It seems to me, Marshall, that this young woman takes a very great interest in you; and that you are by no means behindhand in returning the compliment."

Now it had come! Olive glanced up, in something of apprehension; and Marshall raised his head and regarded his father quietly.

"Yes, sir," he answered. "I am afraid that what I am going to say will offend you far more than I have ever offended you yet, but it has got to be said; and now that we are all together, perhaps it can be said most safely without danger of anger."

"Come to the point," retorted his father. "There is far too much of the prelude."

"Then, sir, the point is that I love this young lady."

"H'm!" Samuel Berrimeed coughed. A mill-girl a young lady! After that he could not doubt his son's infatuation.

"Moreover, I am happy to know that she loves me," the young man continued.

"Ay, I doubt not that! It would be a foolish mill-girl who did not discover that she loved a man in your position, when he was fool enough to love her."

"You wrong her, sir," was the answer. "Mary Grey met my first advances with scorn."

"Woman's way! It is always 'No' when 'Yes' is meant."

"It was not so here, sir. She said that she would leave the place if I persevered; and when, in my folly, I accused her of dishonesty and double-dealing, being jealous of having seen her with Sir Digby, she immediately discharged herself. Even now, sir, she refuses to listen to me, unless I have your consent."

"H'm!" grunted Mr. Berrimeed.

"And she still refuses to inform me of what passed between Sir Digby and herself."

"Husband!"

"It was Mrs. Berrimeed who spoke. Her voice was low but determined; and they all turned towards her.

"What is it, sweetheart?" her husband said; and she replied:

"You said just now that we would have no secrets from each other."

"Certainly I did."

"Then we will have none. I have had a secret from you for many a day—a secret in which this man is mixed. It was that which made me

faint that evening when he first came here; and I also have much to be grateful for to Mary Grey."

"Well, well," murmured the mill-owner, "surprise follows surprise!" But then he added earnestly, and with old-fashioned courtesy: "My wife, I trust you in everything. If your secret is painful, and you would rather still keep it, then I do not want to hear it."

"It is like you to speak so," she answered, her eyes filling with tears. "But I will not take advantage of your faith. Secrets are bad things, I have found; and mine shall be shared with you and these, our children."

And so Mrs. Berrimeed, of her own will, told her story of the miseries and trials of her girlhood, of her belief in Sir Digby, and her horror and dismay when she discovered that he was as evil as the rest, of her flight and her subsequent life, and of the terror which came to her when her enemy boasted that he still held her girlish letters, and threatened to use them against her unless she consented to his proposals.

"I was determined to tell you everything," she said.

"I only wish you had, dear. I shall always regret that I have not had the opportunity of kicking that rascal out of the place."

And then she went on to tell of the part which Mary Grey had played; and at last Marshall understood what had been mystifying before, and only loved his darling the more for her faithfulness; while Samuel Berrimeed sat, his hands in his pockets, and a perplexed frown on his face. This girl certainly presented a puzzling problem for solution, and it would take some time to solve it.

He looked up when his wife had finished. He rose, and went over and kissed her.

"Sweetheart, surely you could have trusted my love with such a secret!" he said. "There was no disgrace attaching to you." And then he added: "Now, isn't it time that we had lunch?"—and so changed the subject. But of Marshall's love, or of Mary Grey, he spoke not a single word.

CHAPTER 31.

The Visit of Samuel Berrimeed.

"I HAVE got one piece of news for you!" Mary said, with a smile; and at that all the girls clustered round her eagerly.

"Wot is it, Mary?" they asked. "Yo' cummin' back ageean?"

"I think that I shall be back very soon," she answered; "but what I wanted to say is that the lady who has helped me with money—Lady Stanton—is going to come down to the opening."

"Oh, that's nowt!" they answered. "It's yo' we want, Mary. We doan't care abaat foine ladies, so lung as we ha' yo' wi' us."

"But I hope that you will care for her," she answered.

"Then we wull. If yo' wants it, we wod be sure to loike her."

"Muther," came from Bess—she had taken the little ones to the front, so that the room where Mary was might not be too crowded—that was like thoughtful little Bess—"muther, heer is Mestur Marshall comin' daan the street. P'r'aps he's comin' to see Mary."

"My sakes! Heer, yo' girls clear off, aw o' yo'! Yo' can cum ageean, yo' know. Clear off, naa!" And the girls accordingly cleared.

But as they went, how they looked and smiled, and what wondering whispers they indulged in. Their youthful hearts were filled with delight. They had heard of the cheers that morning—they knew that it was Mr. Marshall who had saved Mary, and they were by no means slow to put things together. Mr. Marshall and Mary would be "walkin' aat" together before very long, according to their estimation of things.

And then Marshall came—of course it was only to ask how Mary was

getting on—at least that is what he said to the Medsters; though whether they believed it or not was quite another matter. It did not seem as if they did; for they, having shown him into the best room, retired, and discreetly retired, and discreetly closed the door upon Mary and himself.

And he came to her side, and took her hand, and looked down into her eyes; and then, without a word, he stooped and kissed her.

"Mary, my love," he said.

And he had so much to tell her now. How he knew of what had taken her out to see Sir Digby that night, and of what service she had been to his stepmother; and Mary listened, smiling and happy, and nodded in approval when she heard of how Mrs. Berrimeed had taken her husband into her confidence.

"That is the best of all," she said. "Now she will have no cause to worry."

And then he spoke of how he had told his father everything, and of how Samuel Berrimeed had made no comment.

"I can hardly think that he is angry," he said, "or he would have shown it."

"You cannot say that he is pleased," was her reply, and he had to acknowledge the truth of her statement.

"Now, Marshall"—how prettily she uttered that word, he thought—"it is no good your bothering and worrying. I have said that I cannot listen to your proposal unless your father himself consents. Is that too big a test of your love?"

"Not if it cannot be altered, Mary," he said. "I know my father is a prejudiced man, but—if you say that——"

"That he is your father, and that you ought to consider him."

"I agree with every word of that. Then, Mary, I shall try and persuade him, or, rather, I shall hope that presently he will not need persuading; and in the meantime I shall rest content in your love. But you, dear—what are you going to do?"

"Well," she answered, "in the first place, I must go back to town, for the simple reason that I have been so busy with your affairs that I have not seen to my own. Then I shall be back——"

"How soon?" he queried eagerly.

"I shall certainly be back for the opening of the institute. I could not miss that, you know."

"Yes. But, dear, afterwards?"

"I shall not go back to the mill, of course. I think that I shall find enough to do at the institute."

"But money?"

"I shall talk Lancashire to you, and say: 'Dinna fluster yoursel'," she answered.

And then they sat there, happy in their love; and to Marshall it seemed as if a great cloud had been rolled away. His father knew now, and there was no question of deceiving him; and in his heart he hoped that the silence on the subject which the mill-owner had maintained was to be taken as a sign that he was not so very displeased after all.

Later in the day, John Medster, lounging in his little front garden, and smoking his pipe, let that pipe drop from his lips, and was, to use his favourite expression, 'capt' indeed, as he saw Samuel Berrimeed manifestly making directly for his humble abode.

"You have a lass living here with you, Medster," the mill-owner said abruptly, as he came up. "Is she within doors?"

"Ay, sir."

"Well, I would like to see her. You tell her that I would like to see her."

So the great man was admitted; and Mary was informed, in awed and excited whispers, that Mr. Berrimeed himself was there; and, to the Medsters' surprise, Mary did not exhibit any signs of perturbation at the news, but went in calmly, and shut the door behind her.

And Samuel Berrimeed looked at her sharply, and then advanced and held out his hand, and said bluntly:

"Young lady, before I do anything else, I want to thank you for the service—the disinterested service—which you have rendered to my wife."

"I am glad——" began Mary, but he interrupted her.

"Yes, yes; of course! Now, I want to talk of something else—something—er—rather delicate, and—it may be—a trifle embarrassing. Has my son spoken to you? But, there, I know he has, and——"

"I have told him that I cannot listen to him unless you consent."

"Yes? Very right and proper. But you don't hope that I shall consent, do you?"

"I certainly do hope so."

"You do? Well, I—I——"

"Mr. Berrimeed," she interrupted, "I quite understand your position, and it would be unfair to you if I did not take you into my confidence. I have my secret also."

"Ay!" said the mill-owner. "Why——" And then he stopped. He became aware that Mary Grey was certainly no common mill-hand, and—she was holding out a card—a lady's visiting card!

Whatever was written upon it, it produced a remarkable effect upon the mill-owner; for he looked and gasped, and muttered: "Tut, tut! God bless me! I am amazed!"

The Medsters without heard—they could not help hearing—his loud, hearty laugh later, but they did not know what had passed between them. Only when at last Samuel Berrimeed came out he was beaming, and he nodded pleasantly to the family, and tossed a five-shilling piece to the children, and he kissed—he actually kissed—Mary at the gate, and said to her: "Good-bye, my dear! I will remember everything. It will be a joke!" And with that he went, and all that John Medster could do was to shake his head, and say to his wife:

"Owd woman, doan't talk to me! Doan't say nowt! Aw'm capt! Aw'm capt aw th' toime naa, Aw think, and this caps aw else that's gone afore."

But what passed between the mill-owner and Mary no one knew—not even Marshall; and a couple of days later Mary Grey started once more for far-off London, promising faithfully to be back in time for the opening of the institute.

CHAPTER 32.

The Opening of the Institute.

THE institute was to be opened.

Prior to the tragic events which had taken place, that would not have attracted very much notice, for, at the best, the work was but small.

Mary Grey, at the beginning, had worked in the little mission-room belonging to the church, and her girls had not numbered more than a dozen; but, bit by bit, the thing had grown, and others had joined, and the clergyman, who had first permitted her to have the room, and Mr. Chepworth, the head-super, had watched, and judiciously helped, until it became

evident to them that the seeds of something important had been sown. The institute increased, and the strange girl, Mary Grey, developed a decided power over her companions, and, through them, the young men.

"Get the girls, you get the lads!" said the vicar, and his words were being proved true.

It had therefore become a matter of necessity to enlarge their premises where the institute had been held, and so money had been collected and improvements were carried out, and the girls, headed by their energetic secretary, Annie Medster, had prepared a programme of singing and reciting and Swedish drill—things unknown and undreamt of before in the history of the place, and all first introduced by Mary Grey. But outside this immediate circle the matter would have attracted little or no attention had it not been for the graver business attending the fire at Chubbly, and the arrest, and subsequent suicide, of the man. The moment that it became known that the heroine of these incidents was none other than Mary, "the lass from Lunnon," then interest grew to fever-heat, and everyone talked about the institute and the opening.

And the day came at last. Saturday, chosen because the workers had their half-holiday, and could be present without losing any "brass." A fine Saturday, with bright sunshine above and a soft breeze just tempering the heat.

And the institute looked as fine as a new pin. The girls had cleaned and scrubbed, and scrubbed and cleaned, and arranged tables with white cloths, and plenty of cake and jam and such-like delicacies.

And the flowers! Oh, the gardens that were plundered, and the great store from Oakhurst Park, sent by Mrs. Berrimeed, and the big bunch of roses sent down with a message from Mr. Berrimeed—the idea of it!—that they were to be put just before the chair where Mary Grey was to sit. That looked as if Mary Grey was certainly going to be there; and yet Mary Grey had not appeared, and hearts were anxious in consequence.

Annie had received a letter from London two days before, in which Mary said that they were to go on and get everything ready, and that she would be sure and not disappoint them. They looked for her on the Friday night, but she did not come; they looked for her on Saturday morning, but she was still absent; and—and—why, the next train would not be in until close on twelve, and if she did not come by that she would not be there in time.

"Aw shanna loike it a bit if hoo doan't come!" was Annie's remark, and her mother replied:

"Huish wi' yo'! If Mary sed hoo wod come, then hoo wull come, that's sewer!"

That was all very well. Annie indulged in something of the same faith. But, then, how could she come? She could not fly, and if she missed the train there was no other way.

"Fur goodness' sake, Annie Medster, doo go aat, an' doan't keep flustering raand loike this!" Mrs. Medster exclaimed at last. "Aw've got the flinters wi' it! Yo' shapest loike a flea in a glue-pot, wi' tha worryin'! Yo' go raand and see that the flowers in th' pots doan't want no moar water, an' leave me to see that these last caakes get baked reet!"

So off Annie set, and she met other girls near the institute—girls eager as she was.

"Has hoo cum yet, Annie?" was the general question, but Annie shook her head glumly.

"Noa, hoo isna theer vet."

"Oh, Aw hope hoo wull come! Th' institute looks rare and foine, bud Aw shanna loike it a bit if Mary doan't cum."

Two o'clock, and the place was quite full of people; and Annie and her assistants had shown them all to their places, and still—oh, still Mary's place was empty.

Annie was just conducting two ladies to their places, when from outside there came a yell. She stopped, glanced towards the door, and then, with a shout, she bolted, for Mary had kept her word, Mary was just coming in.

"Hurrah! Mary! Mary!" she shouted, unmindful of everything else. "Oh, this is rare and fine! And how gradely foine you look! Aw wor so feart that yo' wodna come!"

And then her voice was lost in the clapping and cheering of the other girls, and, amidst the glad welcome, Mary moved forward, greeting one after another of her old friends.

But they rubbed their eyes, for surely this could not be their Mary, this lady with such beautiful clothes! Marshall, wedged in between his mother and a stout old lady, could not go to speak to her, and, indeed, it was hardly a fitting time to do so; but even he stared and wondered, and then, as if by instinct, she looked over to him, and mingling with a glance full of love there was more than a suspicion of a roguish smile.

But Mary did not go to her seat amongst the girls; she moved up to the place reserved for the London lady, the place where the bunch of big roses was, and it was Samuel Berrimeed himself who conducted her thither, as grave as a judge. Marshall wondered still more, and even Olive looked surprised, and at last bent over and whispered:

"Marshall, other people can have secrets, I think, and father and your Mary have one between them. We shall know all about her to-day."

Then the mayor got up and explained why they were there, and told how the institute was started, and how it had prospered, and what good had been done by its foundress; and then they clapped and cheered again, quite unmindful of the fact that the London lady had not come to open the building—they did not mind that now that Mary was there.

And then he called upon Miss Annie Medster, the earnest young secretary, to read the report; and when Annie got up, if John Medster did not shout:

"Bravo, aar Annie! Goo on, lass, and read wot tha hast written!"

They laughed at that, and Annie turned hot and glanced towards Mary, and got a look in return which just drove all her fears away; and she stood and read her report, and people clapped and smiled, and said that she did very well.

And then Mr. Berrimeed rose, and said that they had amongst them the author of a story which some of them had read with pleasure not so long ago, an author who wrote under the name of Lucius; and before the building was formally opened Lucius would speak to the girls.

Marshall pricked up his ears and looked round. Lucius, the famous critic who had dealt so favourably with his own work, and—why—— Mary got up! Mary! Of all the wonderful things! He could have repeated John Medster's favourite expression, and said: "Well, I'm capt!"

And Mary spoke so lovingly. Told them how at first she had wanted to write a book about mill-girls' life, and so she had come down to live amongst them, and see just how they lived. And then she went on to speak of life being a story which each had to write, and how each day was a pure, clean sheet, on which deeds had to be written. Just a quiet little lesson which everyone could understand, and which, being given, she sat down. And then more speeches, bright, cheery little speeches, until the mayor said that now they would ask Lady Stanton to formally open the institute.

But that did not suit some of them, and there were cries, amidst which

Tom Rhole's was heard the loudest, of "Mary! Mary! We wants Mary to speak!"

Up got the mayor again, looking dreadfully severe, or perhaps it was only pretence.

"I am conducting this meeting, my friends," he said, "and I now ask Lady Mary Stanton to open the institute." And then, while they looked round, wondering where the lady could be, and almost wishing that she was not there at all, if Mary did not get up once more!

"I do not know," she said, "whether I am most happy or most sad to-day. I do not know whether I shall be gaining fresh friends or losing old ones. I hope I shall not do that. I have told you how I came down here to write a book, and how I found nothing but kindness——"

"'Cept from owd Dwite," cried a voice; and she smiled.

"I will not listen to a word against Mr. Dwite, for he only did what anyone in his place would have done. I have always found him a real good man to work with——"

"So he is!" from John Medster. "Goo on, aar Mary!"

"Hush, hush! Order!" cried some of the gentry indignantly; but Mary stretched out her hands, and her voice trembled.

"That's rare and fine," she said, using their expression. "I hope that to you all I shall always be 'Aar Mary,' and nothing else. Of course, I could not tell you that I was Lady Mary Stanton, or I do not think you would have made friends with me. It has been better only to be Mary Grey. I have gained the friendship of my dear girls here, and made other friendships which must last while life lasts." Here she looked across at Marshall. "I just hope that this institute will be a great blessing to many and many a girl here; and now all I have to do is to declare that it is open."

She stopped—she would have said more, but her heart was too full; and then Marshall Berrimeed rose, but his father forestalled him, absolutely elbowed him out, by crying:

"Now then, everyone, are you all ready? Come on—three cheers for aar Mary!"

And in John Medster's words: "Do Aw think he meant it? Ay, Aw do, heck."

CHAPTER 33. Conclusion.

IF anyone has need to ask whether the tea which followed the speeches, or the concert which followed the tea, was a success, all I have to say is that that one must be very dense indeed. Everything was a success from beginning to end.

It was a day of surprises, and the most delightful, wondrous surprise to the girls was, that being a grand lady did not alter Mary in the least. Not the least! She was just the same; and to prove it, after tea was over, and before the games began, she slipped away, and came back presently in her mill dress, with her shawl and her clogs, just as they had known her, and loved her, all along.

A success from beginning to end; every item and detail was successful. It was one of those occasions when one begrudges miserly old Time for snatching away the fleeting minutes so quickly; when one would like to put back the hands of the clock, if it were possible; when the only regret is that at last the moment comes when parting handshakes must be exchanged, and people must wend their way homewards.

And then when that time came Mary stood there, and John Medster approached her; the same blunt, honest John, if a trifle diffident now.

"Mary," he said, and then he stopped. "Aw beg yo'r pardon. Aw suppose Aw ought to say——"

"Mary," she answered, "and nothing but Mary, unless you want to quarrel with me, Mr. Medster."

"Then Mary it is, fo' Aw doan't want to quarrel wi' yo', lass. Aw wor goin' to say, wor be yo' goin'? Aw yo' comin' whoam wi' us ta-neet?"

Mary hesitated. It was on the tip of her tongue to say yes, though she had rooms engaged at the hotel; but while she pondered Marshall Berrimeed came to her side—the first time that he had managed to get to speak with her for more than a few moments all through that afternoon and evening—and he seemed to have guessed what John Medster was saying, for he answered:

"No; that won't do, Medster. You must not be greedy. You have had Mary for a long while, and now I want her. Mary, will you come home with us?"

"But——" She hesitated, and he smiled.

"It is all right. I am commissioned by my father. 'Mind you ask Mary to come back with us, in case I miss her,' he said. Will you come, dear?" he added, in lower tones. "I am so bewildered. There is so much I want to ask you about." And so she placed her hand in his.

"I had better go and dress," she said. "I put these on to please the girls, and regain their confidence."

"It was wisely thought of, dear; but there is no need to alter what is a very charming costume—at least, charming when you don it. Besides," he added softly: "I am like the workers. I shall always like 'aar Mary,' even better than I do Lady Mary Stanton; while as for Lucius, I shall stand in positive awe of her."

"Now, Marshall! Oh, here you are, Mary! I am not going to stand on ceremony, and it will have to be Mary or nothing. You are coming back with us. You must! Now, look here, lass, I am a plain man, and I am going to say something that I want you to believe. When I came over to the Medsters' that evening, it was just to tell you that since you and Marshall had fallen in love, that, mill-hand or no mill-hand, I would not stand in your way. It was a bitter pill, I own, for Marshall is my only boy, and I had planned great things for him; and you know the way in which society looks on things. I was disappointed, but I chose his happiness before my own plans. However, you took the wind out of my sails when you told me your secret. I have kept it for you, though I had a bit of a job. I felt that I must laugh, and confess, when I heard them talking. Well, I am honest enough to say that I am a great deal better satisfied to find you Lady Stanton than to know you were only Mary Grey; but I don't think it will make a bit of difference to Marshall. I don't want you to think that you are only welcome because you happen to be a titled lady, though I am afraid that is what you will think." And Samuel Berrimeed ended this, a longer speech than he had made for many a long day.

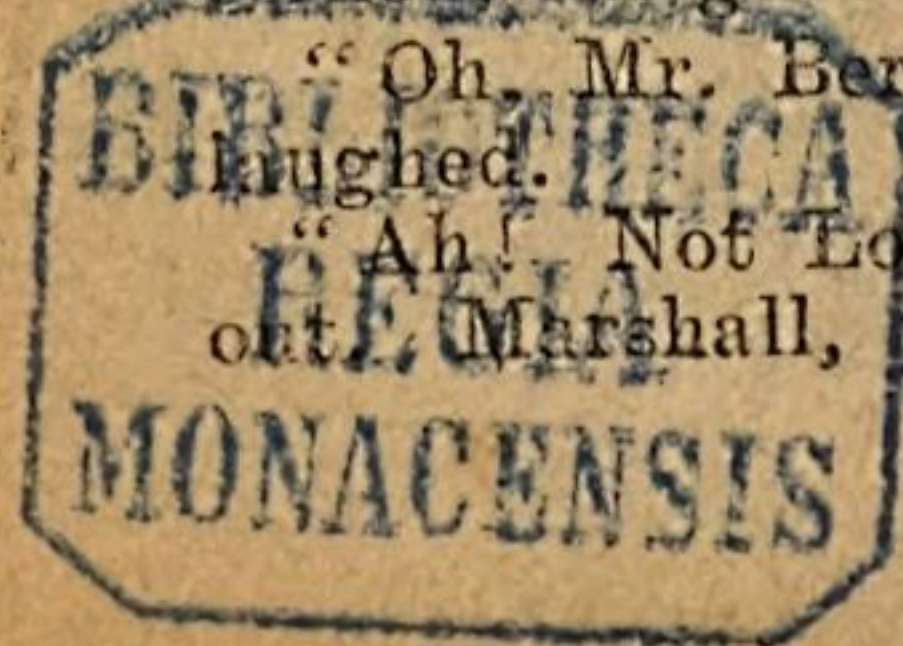
And Mary turned to him with a smile.

"I understand, Mr. Berrimeed. It was because I saw through your purpose when you came that I took you into my confidence, for I felt that I had no right to deceive one so generous as you were proving yourself."

"That's right, lass! Then you are our guest; and, so far as I am concerned, our guest you can stay until you become our daughter."

"Oh, Mr. Berrimeed!" protested Mary, her face crimsoning; and he laughed.

"Ah! Not London ways? No; we in the North speak our minds right out. Marshall, you can bring Mary along. I am going in the carriage





Escott-Inman, H.

The Romance of Berrimeed Mill A Powerful Story of Lancashire Life

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